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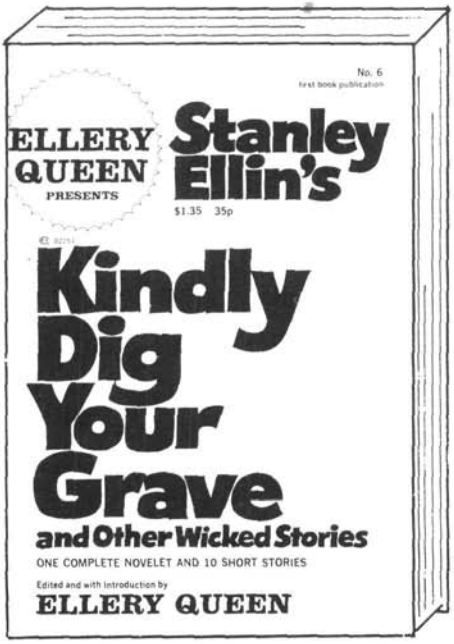

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ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

FILE #10: THE MAIMED AND THE HALT	Joe Gores	6
THE LIVING END	Dana Lyon	20
THE THREE TRAVELLERS	R. L. Stevens	31
THE CORN THIEF	Guy Owen	38
A PRIMER FOR MURDER	Frank Snider	53
GRUDGE FIGHT	Leo Giroux, Jr.	57
THE PRETTY LADY PASSES BY	Joyce Harrington	69
THE TIGER OF THE MEKONG	MacLean O'Spelin	82
THE SLEEPING DOG	Ross Macdonald	96
DEAL 'EM, CHICK!	S. S. Rafferty	112
MOMENT OF TRUTH	Lawrence Treat	123
THE PROBLEM OF THE HAUNTED BANDSTAND	Edward D. Hoch	144
MYSTERY NEWSLETTER	Otto Penzler & Chris Steinbrunner	135-143
THE JURY BOX	John Dickson Carr	138

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FILE #10:
THE MAIMED AND THE HALT

by JOE GORES

The silver-haired man paused at the head of the wide steps of San Francisco City Hall. He stuck his silver-headed black walking stick under one arm while lighting a thin cheroot. With his ramrod posture and his ascetic face he looked like an oldtime riverboat gambler.

Then he started down the steps.

A grimace of pain contorted his features. Only the cane, thumping heavily on each step, kept him from falling. His crabwise downward progress was agonizingly slow; it was like watching a film depicting torture.

"You say *he* drives his own car?" demanded Dan Kearny unbelievingly. Kearny was pushing 50 but didn't look it, a hard-jawed man with a graying mane of hair and a nose bent and flattened by a lifetime of not backing away from trouble.

"Special controls so he can operate everything with the use of only one leg." Meyer Edmunds was pudgy and perspiring, with

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thinning sandy hair and an insistent cologne. "That man has just finished ripping off Fiduciary Trust Insurance for two-hundred-and-seventy-five thousand bucks. Don't quote me, of course."

"This special car of his—a Cadillac, I suppose?"

Edmunds nodded glumly. "Colonel Sanders always goes first cabin."

"The Colonel Sanders of chicken fame?"

Patrick Michael O'Bannon had thrust his flame-topped head into the crowded cubbyhole office. He pulled the door shut so that outside lights would not dim the moving images on the tacked-up screen.

"Colonel Buford Sanders, USAF Retired," said Kearny.

"*Buford* Sanders? You mean *my* Colonel Sanders?"

"Now you know why I wanted you in here."

Edmunds rewound the film as O'B sat down. Daniel Kearny Associates (Head Office in San Francisco, Branches Throughout California) seldom drew the VIP of a big insurance company as a possible client; it had to be something unusual if their own investigators couldn't handle it. Meyer Edmunds started the film over again.

"O'B, this is everything our boys have gotten on him over the past two years—since the car accident."

The clips, spliced end to end, showed twenty continuous minutes in the life of Colonel Buford Sanders. Some in black and white, some in color, some of theater excellence, others hand-held from moving cars or through fences, one from over a transom.

In all of them Sanders was doing the same thing. Limping.

"Are you *sure* he's faking it?" asked Kearny dubiously.

"No, I'm not, Dan, and that's the hell of it. I'm the only one who still thinks it's fraud. We've already paid off."

The lights went up. Willowy blonde Giselle Marc had delivered the ice Kearny had called upstairs to clerical for, had collected O'B's wink, and had departed. Drinks were in hand and cigarettes were alight. It was one of the few times, O'B thought, that Kearny's office in the basement of the old Victorian which housed DKA resembled the fictional private-eye's domain.

"Nine Caddys we've repossessed from that man," O'B mused. His seamed, freckle-spattered face blueprinted a middle-aged drinker's life, but next to Kearny he was the best field investigator DKA had. "Nine. Spread out over almost ten years. And this is the first time I've ever seen even a picture of the man."

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"We haven't had a new assignment on him in thirty months," said Kearny as he consulted the Colonel's bulging file.

"Since the car accident," Edmunds said.

"We picked up four Caddys in California," said O'Bannon, "two in New York, one in New Orleans, one—no, two—in Florida. He plays games, that man does."

"With all the computerized credit checking there is today, how could he even *buy* nine Cadillacs, one after the other, and—"

"He looks so good on paper that the dealers just never bother to run him through a credit-reporting service," said O'B. "He's retired military, gets a fat government pension, has a hell of an expensive home in Seacliff—"

"Dealers are required by law to get a certain percentage of the sales price," Kearny explained, "but no law says they can't balloon six or seven hundred of that down payment and get it a couple of months after delivery. The Colonel never makes the balloon payment and it usually takes us about six months to drop a rock on the new Caddy. By then the bank's eaten the contract and it's on contingent."

"But you have *always* made recovery," Edmunds persisted.

"What's to recover?" said O'B. "Last one I picked up had tires you could read through, a cracked block, no transmission, and a crankshaft dragging on the ground. The client took a twelve-thousand-dollar bath when we sold it for junk in Tallahassee."

Edmunds sighed and stood up. "Ten days of additional surveillance is all I've been able to gouge out of the head office. After that we close the file—unless you turn up *proof* of fraud."

"Why us?" asked Kearny.

"By now he knows all my people by their first names."

"If he blows his nose, I'll be holding the handkerchief," promised O'Bannon.

DKA seldom got to mount a concentrated surveillance on a single subject, expenses unlimited. O'B brought in two other DKA investigators, Larry Ballard and Bart Heslip. Heslip was a black ex-boxer who found the same excitement in manhunting that the ring had once given him; Ballard was a late-twenties blond man, just under six feet and conditioned like an athlete.

"Remember, gents, even more important than uninterrupted observation is the fact that he *must never know,* must never even *suspect,* that someone's staked out on him. If he's been disciplined

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enough to never give himself away once during two years—"

"But he's already been paid off," Heslip pointed out.

"That's what we're banking on," O'B said. "But remember, this guy can *smell* a setup. He's gun-shy. I've been after him for ten years."

"Unmarried, I take it?" asked Ballard.

"Widowed seven years ago."

"Why not get a woman next to him and—"

"Four insurance-company baggers tried in the last two years." Baggers are female investigators, who often carry tape-recorders in their handbags. "But part of the basis for the high settlement was his claim that the accident made him impotent. Nothing stirring."

"If we could catch him shacking up—" Heslip shook his head and chuckled. "Man, two *years?* That takes *some* sort of cool."

"He's got it," said O'Bannon.

Ballard was thoughtful. "How about—oh, sports? Catch him in a gymnasium? On a weekend hike? Horseback riding?"

"He does go to a gym five times a week—for whirlpool therapy. They haven't caught him taking a weekend anywhere since the accident. Church every Sunday—stands in back because he claims he can't kneel down. Until the accident he didn't go to church at all."

That briefing was on the first morning of surveillance, which was carried out essentially from the garret room of an elegant three-story red brick whose owner owed Edmunds a favor. It was directly across Scenic Way from the subject's distinctive colonial revival with its hipped roof and second-floor Palladian window.

"With a house like that, servants, a gardener—what's the cat on the hustle for?" mused Heslip.

"You've answered your own question. He *likes* the hustle."

"There he is," said Ballard from the window.

The sandbagged 600mm lens brought Colonel Buford Sanders up close enough, as he laboriously descended his front steps, to count the hairs in his mustache. Click. Click. Click. But O'B knew, even as he took them, that the stills would only support Sanders' claim. He checked his watch and stood up.

"Time for his hour with the Jacuzzi bath. See you gents later."

The therapist, Wednesday lunch at the Presidio officers' club, back home. O'B had the daily routine down pat. It was on the return trip, with Sanders' special Caddy two blocks ahead, that O'B

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became aware of a new element in the equation. On Thursday, when he popped into the office after business hours, he told Kearny about it.

"Edmunds must still have one of his people second-guessing us, Dan. There was a second tail on Sanders for five blocks yesterday afternoon, and this morning a TV repair truck from a company that isn't in the phone book was parked down the street for twenty minutes. Ballard thinks someone was tagging him, too."

Kearny was already at the phone, having Edmunds paged out of the steamroom at the Elks Club. In a few minutes he hung up.

"Not Edmunds. But somebody else at Fiduciary must have had a bright idea. Edmunds will check around, make sure the field man gets yanked." He was on his feet. "Let's go get a drink."

"You'll find this hard to believe, but I can't. I'm due to relieve Bart in half an hour."

"His girl friend's back east visiting her folks—so Bart's got nothing better to do. And this *might* be important. You know how good Larry is with women, well, day before yesterday he spotted that good-looking maid of Sanders drinking at a little bar on Lincoln Way and Twentieth Avenue where Larry hangs around."

They shouldered into their topcoats, then paused at the front of the garage to set the alarms and lock up before going out into the chill September evening.

"Coincidence?"

"Can't see it being anything else," said Kearny. "She just likes to drink—with anybody who isn't her husband."

"That covers a lot of ground," said O'B. "And her with two kids at home. Tsk, tsk. We'd better go speak to the girl."

Jacques Daniels' was not a fancy way of speaking about a sour-mash bourbon. It was a bar owned by two partners, one a small lively balding Frenchman from Algeria who had given his first name to the place, the other a pert little blonde named Beverly Daniels. She and Larry Ballard were talking across the bar when O'B and Kearny entered.

The place was warm and cosy and intimate, with mismatched hardwood tables, myriad hanging ferns, and handmade Tiffany-style lamps that cast a soft stained glow across the drinkers. Lying on the bar beside Ballard were two DKA report forms with typing on them. Ballard tapped them with a finger. Kearny scooped them up in passing.

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Ballard murmured, apparently to Beverly, "Brunette by the jukebox. Tailed her last night."

The two detectives pulled out chairs on both sides of the generously endowed black-haired girl. She had a long upper lip that showed precise incisors. Those in the lower jaw had a habit of worrying the protruding lip as she talked.

Her voice was sullen. "I'm waiting for someone."

"You weren't yesterday when Frankie Gallaway stopped at your table." Kearny had scanned Ballard's report for a few moments.

"Your name is Rosario Renucci. You've been a maid for four years on Scenic Way." O'Bannon hadn't read Ballard's report, but he could follow Kearny's leads easily enough.

"*Married* name," said Kearny.

"What sort of scam is—" she began.

"Husband is Ermanno Renucci," said O'Bannon.

"Hard-working guy at a foundry on Brannan Street. Hot-tempered but a home-loving sort of person. Salt of the earth."

"If you think you can—"

"Two children, minors, ages four and two." O'B shook his head sadly. "Rosie, Rosie, what are we going to do with you? Ermanno finds out—" He shaped his lips in a *whew* position, shook one hand back and forth as if he'd caught it in a car door. "Comes home sometime, finds those two sweet little kids all alone—"

Her face seemed about to crumble, but she was still in there trying. "You guys don't beat it, I'll call the cops."

"And we'll call Ermanno." Kearny began reading in a low voice from Ballard's report. "Eight fifty-eight p.m., Wednesday, September twenty-ninth, subject met male Caucasian subsequently identified as Frankie Gallaway at Jacques Daniels', a bar at eighteen-forty-nine Lincoln Way."

He raised cold gray eyes to her defiant face, then read again.

"At twelve-o-seven a.m. subject and Gallaway left the bar and proceeded to the residence maintained by Gallaway at the rear of two-nine-eight Parnassus Street. This is a detached cottage reached by a passageway alongside the main building."

"Anybody who says Frankie and I—"

"Subject and Gallaway entered the bedroom at twelve forty-four a.m., switched out the lights at twelve fifty-eight. The lights remained off until two twenty-two a.m. Subject left Gallaway's residence at two forty a.m., after embracing with Gallaway in the open doorway."

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She broke, abruptly, with a half-smothered sob.

"Damn you, you got any idea what it's like? The relatives drooling over the kids? Washing clothes? And dishes? And getting them up and off to school and—"

" 'Tis far better to have loved and lost than to do thirty pounds of dirty laundry a week," observed O'Bannon.

"Look, what can I offer you not to tell Ermanno—"

"Tell us about your boss," suggested Kearny.

She seemed dazed by the abrupt switch. "My boss?"

"He ever make a pass at you?"

"Have other girls in there?"

"He's faking it, isn't he? The limp?"

"Doesn't limp once the shades are drawn, does he, Rosie?"

"How does he get the girls in and out without being seen?"

"How much extra does he give you to cover for him?"

"C'mon, Rosie. Give, girl. Give."

Ashen-faced and shaken, Rosie gave.

It was five a.m. on Saturday. O'Bannon stifled a vast yawn and shivered despite the car heater. He was on Seacliff Ave., a block from the subject's house—where, surprise, surprise, he'd found the specially equipped Cadillac street-parked when he'd arrived two hours before. And Colonel Sanders with that spacious three-car garage under the house!

It fit with what Rosie had overheard Sanders saying on the phone while making motel reservations. He'd be leaving the city around five a.m. on Saturday and would be there by midday at the latest. The clandestine nature of the departure, the fact that the motel was six or seven hours away from San Francisco—a probable five-to-seven bet, O'B thought, that a woman was involved.

He stiffened, crushing the paper cup which had contained his third coffee of the day. His rear-view mirror had seen a figure moving with the now-familiar crabwise shuffle. He used the radio.

"SF-2 to SF-3. Do you read me, Bart, over?"

"Loud and clear." Heslip was, by prearrangement, in his car a quarter block from the subject's house.

"He's just getting into the Caddy over here on Seacliff."

"He back-doored me! If he's tumbled to the stake—"

"Just being cautious. I've got him now. Out."

"10-4, cat. Good hunting. Over and out."

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O'B already had his car in motion, backing and filling as the subject got the Caddy started. O'B was going to try a front tail, the most difficult but also the most difficult to spot. It meant making an educated guess in which direction Sanders would be going. O'B only knew for sure it wouldn't be west—not unless the Caddy came equipped with water wings.

He pulled away ten seconds before Sanders did, took a left into the Presidio off 25th Avenue when he saw Sanders' left blinker go on. That made it easy. Golden Gate Bridge. North.

It was gloriously clear, going to be hot, with the not-yet-risen sun reddening strata of clouds above the Oakland hills before it burst out to make crinkled lead foil of the Bay through the whizzing orange handrails of the bridge. O'B sang with the radio while beating time on the steering wheel. He felt it: this was the day, this was the trip on which he was going to nail Sanders.

And then he almost lost him. Sanders abruptly veered across all four lanes into the old Blackpoint Cut-off which led across the tidal marshes to Vallejo. It took O'B twenty minutes to get turned around, pick him up, pass him, and drop into line an eighth of a mile ahead of him.

Tricky cat. Start out north, then go east. Actually, O'B liked it. Sanders *really* didn't want anyone tagging along.

O'B had assumed it would be northeast from Vallejo on Interstate 80, toward Sacramento, Tahoe, Reno, places like that. But instead it was 680 through Benicia to Concord, then down to turn east on 580 to Livermore, a hot dusty suburban sprawl supported by the nuclear research facility of the University of California.

"With *breakfast*?" exclaimed the dismayed waitress at the diner he'd chosen after Sanders had stopped at a more elaborate restaurant a block farther off the freeway.

"The sun is over the yardarm *somewhere* in this world, me lhove. So I'll be havin' a wee dram o' the Chablis wit' me eggs."

Stopping at Livermore for breakfast meant south on the new Interstate 5, which was unsullied by such namby-pamby things as restaurants, truck stops, gas stations, or roadside cafés. It was a freeway for the traveler in a rush. O'B was content to tag along behind now—Sanders surely would feel he'd shaken any possible tail by this time. Showed how wrong a man could be.

"Looks like it's Bakersfield," mused O'Bannon aloud.

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Which again showed how wrong a man could be.

Fifty miles south on Interstate 5, Sanders turned west on California 152. *West?* Up through the Pacheco Pass? What the hell went on?

An hour later, when Sanders turned north on U.S. 101 at Gilroy, O'Bannon knew. Tricky, indeed! The subject had in effect made a giant circle down through the great interior depressed valley which formed the heart of California between the Sierras and the Coast Range. Now he was headed up toward the Bay area again; if he kept going far enough, he'd be back in San Francisco.

He didn't go that far. At San Jose, 50 miles from the city, he cut over to Interstate 280 and left the freeway at Winchester Boulevard—in plenty of time to honor his motel reservation.

The Cozee-Up Motel was a U-shaped affair triple-tiered around a fiercely blue swimming pool masked from the street and the skyway by dense shrubbery. A motel designed for assignations. O'Bannon, his wrap-around dark glasses leaving little more than his teeth showing, was delving industriously in the trunk compartment of his Chevy Caprice when Sanders came from Registration in his crabwise shuffle. O'B watched him into the first-floor corner room farthest from the office, then went in himself.

"Something on the first floor," he told the iron-eyed woman behind the desk. "As far from the office as possible."

"The *very* end room was just rented, but—"

"How about the one next to it?"

"The maid hasn't gotten—"

"I'll have a cup of coffee while I wait."

A window booth in the coffee shop gave him an excellent view of the subject's dust-filmed Cadillac. The cups of coffee gave him heartburn in the two hours before the motel's senior-citizen maid had snailed her way in and out of his room. The temperature rose as the sun climbed a cloudless smoggy sky. O'B resisted the siren lure of a liquor store two blocks away; he didn't dare break surveillance that long. What the hell, his room would be air-conditioned.

As O'B was fumbling open his door, Sanders emerged from the adjacent one without a glance at the perspiring red-haired man. This gave O'B a chance to see that Sanders' bed was obligingly headed up against the partition between their two rooms.

He watched Sanders take a booth in the coffee shop, then got

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the necessary equipment from his suitcase. Using a quarter-inch cordless battery-powered drill and a long bit, O'B holed the wainscoting to come out under Sanders' bed. Through this hole he inserted a delicate high-resolution pencil mike, which he patched into a sound-activated Uher recorder. Fortunately the hum of the subject's air conditioner was not loud enough to activate the mike.

Sanders returned half an hour later, looking very drawn as he limped across the heat-softened blacktop. Probably that coffee, O'B thought. But what if the guy really *was* crippled? No, couldn't be. Otherwise, what was he doing in San Jose, a mere 50 miles from the city but arrived at by over 200 circuitous miles? Why back-door his own house at five in the ayem? Why street-park his car a block away?

O'B put the monitor plug in his ear. He heard the door opening. Bedsprings. A sigh of relief. Phone. Asking for a number. O'B realized he was holding his breath. Would it be to a woman?

"Hello, Cassie? Just got in. That's right. Of *course* I made sure nobody saw me leave. Couldn't have anyone—what? Yes. What I thought, too. All right. Pick you up about six thirty. We'll eat early so nothing interferes with our night together."

Just what they had suspected! Sanders had a little thing going on the side down here in San Jose and had sneaked down to celebrate the end of his long charade with a shack-up in a motel. Well, kiss your two-seven-five thousand goodbye, baby. Say hello to them cold prison walls.

Cold. Shouldn't have thought of that. How good an icy beer would taste! Send out for a six-pack? No. Didn't want to pinpoint the fact that he was staying in his room.

Sanders was now in the shower, but O'B's, incredibly enough, didn't work. The opportunity had passed anyway, as Sanders was finished now. O'B couldn't chance being under the needle spray when the subject might suddenly decide to take off.

Pool, sparkling and inviting a few paces from his door? No. Same problem.

He tried again to make his air conditioner work. On the blink. Sweat was standing on O'B's face. At least he could get some ice. He found a pitcher and carried it down to the ice-making machine beside the office.

The ice machine was busted.

He drank tepid tapwater from a styrofoam cup—the maid had forgotten to leave any glasses in his room. The water smelled of

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chemicals and tasted of fluorine. He kept on sweating.

He was rapidly coming to hate the guts of the man in the next room.

Thanks to the overheard phone conversation O'B was pouring sweat onto the sun-hot vinyl seat of his Caprice when Sanders limped out to the Caddy at six fifteen. Cassie, the girl on the phone, turned out to be a stunning blonde who lived in a ticky-tacky house off South Bascom Avenue that she'd probably gotten in a divorce settlement.

They ate supper at a very fancy place on East San Carlos near the San Jose State campus. From across the street it looked like cracked crab cocktails, rare roast beef washed down with a vintage burgundy, and chocolate mousse for dessert. O'B watched them through the restaurant window while choking down a food-chain's Quarter-Pounder made of a glutinous mass of chopped cow and soya meal. He ached for them to get back to the motel.

But they didn't go back to the motel. Instead they went south on Market Street, right out of the congested areas of San Jose into, surprisingly, traffic which got fiercer the farther from the center of town they went. Abruptly O'B realized he was buried in a crush of almost stationary autos with no idea of where the Caddy was. Left turn into Umbarger Road.

Which meant the Santa Clara County fairgrounds.

The traffic turned again, O'B willy-nilly with it. Dirt road now, a boy with a flashlight waving the Caprice into one of countless rows of parked cars. O'B got out. The Caddy was nowhere in sight. If Sanders had chosen this way to lose any possible tail, he'd sure succeeded. All O'B could do now was hope that the subject and his blonde had been headed wherever everybody else was going.

He was afoot in a field of sun-yellowed grass which had been trampled flat by thousands of feet. The crowd made no sense. Young and old, middle-aged and senior citizen, babes in arms, long-hairs and straights. A shirt-sleeve crowd, dogs yipping in the dust, transistor radios blaring country music.

Country music? He'd been shucked for sure. Sanders wouldn't be caught dead in this sort of hick crowd.

The mass was funneling down into a sluggish river of elbow-to-elbow humanity which flowed toward a central destination—a massive canvas tent pitched near the racetrack.

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Carnival? No trucks or wagons, no midway, no barkers. But the other possibilities were almost endless. Rodeo? Boxing card? Tent revival? Country-western music show? Old-fashioned barn dance? Cattle auction or livestock judging? He seemed to be the only one in ignorance of which it was. Ah. Posters. But the crush of people was so immense that O'B couldn't see what the posters said. Everyone except him was excited, up, hyper, full of anticipation.

Inside at last, and not even an admission charge collected. Nothing but a portable wooden stage set up at one end of the vast canvas structure and a sea of folding chairs rapidly filling with people. No trapezes slung high overhead. No center rings for performing dogs or horses. No pens, no judging blocks for cattle.

And no Colonel Sanders.

O'B prowled and looked. A group of youngsters in white gowns with gold collars took their place on the wooden risers to the rear of the stage. They started singing *That Old Time Religion.* He remembered, vividly and abruptly, sneaking under the canvas of revival tent shows as a kid. The Holy Rollers one year.

One big roll and save your soul.

He'd clapped erasers for a week after school at Mission High for chanting *that* one in the hall.

Tonight it was a good old fundamentalist preacher all in black urging the sinful to save their souls, wash themselves free from all sin, find God, testify to the Power of The Word.

O'B turned to go. It had been a ploy on Colonel Sanders' part to throw off any possible tail. Carefully skirting the traffic going to the tent revival, leaving O'B hopelessly mired in the jam-up. O'B's only edge was the pencil mike. Sanders wouldn't know about that. Once he and his blonde got going in that motel room—

The preacher had begun exhorting now, cajoling, arms thrust wide to gather in the sinful, his sweat flying, his voice hoarsening as it began to draw its inevitable emotional response.

"He hath filled the hungry with good things. Am I right?"

"You are right!" answered some voices from the crowd.

"He hath sent the rich away empty. Am I right?"

"You are *right*!"

O'B was working his way toward the exit to the parking lots.

"And I say to you, brethren, that The Shepherd rejoices more in the return of one lost sheep than he does in maintaining the whole flock. *Am I right*?"

"*You are right!*" With him now, a massive chorus.

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"Then bring me your poor, and your maimed, and your halt, and your blind. And I will make them whole again. So saith the Lord. Brethren, *am I right*?"

"*YOU ARE RIGHT!*"

Now O'Bannon was breasting a tide—the old and the crippled and the sinful, moving down the aisle to bear witness to the Lord. He paused, looked back, and was transfixed. There, among them, was the familiar silver hair, the pain-lined ascetic face, the bobbing crabwise movement. O'B gaped.

Colonel Buford Sanders, angle-player and game-player and insurance defrauder, going down the aisle of a tent preacher's—

That's when the images began to flick before O'Bannon's eyes, frame after frame like a slide show. Images created from a blazing, belated, but now total comprehension.

Sanders, hiring *his own* private eye. Not a second tail on Sanders that Wednesday—*a tail on O'B!* And, later, a tail on Ballard. Identifying them, clocking their movements, habits.

So Sanders could pay his maid to stage a seduction scene for Ballard, after she had hung around Jacques Daniels' to make sure he would notice her.

Sanders, street-parking his Caddy where he knew O'B would spot it, once O'B believed Sanders was sneaking out of town at five a.m.

Sanders deliberately being too difficult to tail for suspicion to be aroused, but never so difficult that the tail could be lost.

Sanders maybe even paying the management to gimmick the air conditioner and shower in the room whoever was tailing him would be sure to rent. Playing games, as usual.

And Sanders playing *more* games—the non-incriminating phone call to the blonde when he *knew* his room would be bugged.

And now Sanders, head bowed beneath the hands of the Healer in a revival tent at the Santa Clara County fairgrounds, under the watchful eyes of 20,000 people.

"*Oh, God!*" cried the Colonel in a loud voice. "*Oh, God, I am saved! Oh, God be praised! Oh, see me, a sinner, SAVED!*"

And he cavorted around on the stage, shouting the power of the Lord, and hurled up the aisle at a certain red-haired man the cane he would never need again—as 20,000 throats roared their hysterical approval.

Oh, yes, the cane he would never need again. Because Colonel Buford Sanders, USAF, Ret'd, was $275,000 richer with no possi-

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bility of ever being charged with fraud. Some 20,000 good souls, and a trained detective besides, had witnessed the miracle of his cure. A trained detective who, under oath, could only testify as to what he had seen and heard. Who, indeed, had been carefully lured there for that very purpose.

It was too much. It was all just too damned much.

The Colonel embraced the Healer with tears of joy running down his face. As O'B had no doubt, he soon would embrace his blonde—with no worries about what a pencil mike from the next room might pick up.

O'B started to curse. Aloud.

Then the king said to the attendants, Bind his hands and feet and cast him forth into the darkness outside . . .

Yes, O'B cursed. Loudly and bitterly and blasphemously, from the very core of his soul, at how thoroughly and totally he had been set up and taken in by the Colonel. O'Bannon, the Unbeliever, cursed.

. . . where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And they threw O'B out. Bodily.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

DANA LYON

The story of Nell and Emma—they had been "best friends" in high school but hadn't seen each other for more than forty years. Oh, yes, they had kept in touch—had written to each other faithfully on their birthdays. But now hard times and a bleak, frightening future were bringing them together again. . .

THE LIVING END

by DANA LYON

The living arrangements that Nell had made with her friend Emma had not been in effect a month before she realized that it had been a devastating mistake. Why, she asked herself, sitting trembling at her desk while she was going over her bills, hadn't she left well enough alone, without worrying about money all the time? She had her little house, her so-so job with Civil Service and a pension not far in the offing, her solitude at night, her peace and quiet, even if inflation *was* taking a large piece out of her accumulated savings while the little apartment above was standing idle; so why hadn't she left it that way?

Money, she thought. Worrying about the future. Seeing the savings growing smaller instead of larger, feeling the need for an increased income which she'd never get from her job now that she was this close to retirement. So that apartment upstairs that she had built and used herself years ago while her parents were still living in the downstairs quarters was the answer to her need for increased income, just sitting there waiting for another tenant.

She had tried: the nice young couple both of whom worked and were therefore out of the house all day—until she discovered that the girl had been three months' pregnant at the time of signing the lease, and then there was the baby, waking Nell at night with its incessant crying, until she had finally had to give them their

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notice. What was $85 a month weighed against her quiet and peace of mind?

And then the nice-looking middle-aged woman who worked downtown and brought home man after man and was such a wretched housekeeper that some of her roaches had finally invaded Nell's living quarters. Notice served.

And there were others, even less desirable, particularly the ones who managed to evade rent day, and those who wanted to be sociable, wanting to use her telephone or her washer, wanting her to accept C.O.D. packages and forgetting to repay her, and always and forever the excuses for not being able to pay the rent. ("Just a week or two, Nell dear—I'm expecting a check in the mail any day.")

She had hated being a landlady, but now she was hating, even more, seeing her small savings depleted in order to take up the slack caused by inflation. Nevertheless, no more bothersome tenants—until suddenly she had thought of Emma.

Emma had been her closest friend, her chum, when they were in high school together, her confidante, nearer to her than anyone else had ever been. Arms entwined, heads together, whispering about boys, daringly discussing the origins of life—a commitment they knew would last for life. It didn't, of course.

Nell had gone her way to college and other friends, to love affairs and marriage, to divorce and finally a job with the state, and somewhere along the way Emma had been almost forgotten. Except for one definite and unfailing commitment that had lasted all these years: they exchanged long letters on each other's birthday and thus at least kept in touch once a year. But as time went on there was little to tell each other about their lives which had remained almost static in their later years.

They were both in their early sixties now, but this one contact remained; they dared not neglect this birthday acknowledgement for fear that whoever didn't write would be considered dead by the other. So they had continued writing. . .

Emma, Nell thought now. I know she doesn't have much money. I wonder if she'd like to take the apartment overhead. I could bring the rent down to $75, and I'd be company for her, and she'd be company for me—but not too much, not as if, heaven forbid, we had to live in the same rooms. Nell enjoyed her privacy too much, her own way of doing things—letting the dishes go if she felt like it, or flying at the cleaning chores some weekend if

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that was what possessed her at the time, or playing the radio late at night, or the TV, or painting in her little studio room. Snacks at any hour of the day when she was home, instead of regular meals. Quiet reading. Walks alone along the country road where she lived. Just to be alone when she wanted to be—

However, the apartment upstairs was entirely separate, and even had an outside staircase of its own, and someone like Emma, who had always been so thoughtful of others, would not make much noise. The $75 would help; it would just about take over the depletion that present-day prices had made in her savings. Well—a few more years and she'd be able to retire on her pension and what she had managed to save during the years of her enslavement. But there'd be no savings left unless she rented the apartment.

Emma was delighted. She wrote, "I have been so depressed, dearest Nell, because I thought the rest of my life would have to be spent alone, no family, even my friends here are dying off; and you make the little apartment sound so fascinating. I'll give notice on this dinky room I live in." Room, thought Nell; is that all she has?—and began to feel qualms along with the Good Samaritan warmth within her. "I'll just pack up my things and get a bus ticket and be with you in a week."

More qualms. Why was Emma in such a hurry? What was she doing that she could pack up and leave her way of life and her job and what friends she had, without another thought—too eager, perhaps, to join Nell's life? Well, no matter, they could still lead their individual lives. Emma would be getting a cheap apartment and Nell would be getting an increased income.

Nell spent the following weekend giving the little apartment—sitting-room, kitchen, bedroom, and bath—a thorough cleaning. She laundered the curtains, put everything in place, even added a little bouquet of flowers from the garden just before she went off to the bus station to greet her friend.

"I can't believe it!" Nell exclaimed over and over as they drove back to the house. "You seem just the same, dear. I just can't believe it, how long has it been, you've hardly changed at all—"

"Nor you," said Emma, beaming, both of them fully aware they were lying. "How could we ever have been separated for so long?"

"Well, like everyone else, we got busy with our own lives. Here we are," and she pulled into the carport at the side of the house.

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"Do come into my little nest for a bite before I take you upstairs."

"What a darling place!" Emma exclaimed, looking around Nell's cozy living room. "Don't bother with anything, dear, I won't want to put you to any trouble."

Nell beamed. "Well, if you're not hungry, how about a little glass of sherry?"

"No, thanks, but you go ahead."

They sat there, in Nell's charming little living room, and for a moment said nothing. What was left to say? They had chattered all the way from the bus station, but now there was nothing left that hadn't already been said in their long exchange of letters. They had changed, indeed: Nell, the tall, graceful, dark-haired high-school girl, was now lean rather than slender, her dark hair mostly white, her once lovely eyes shadowed by glasses, her lipstick not quite even; and Emma, the plump, plain little high-school girl was now plumper and plainer. Her faded blonde-white hair was cut in a Buster Brown fashion, making her look like a prematurely aging kindergartener, her dress was flowery, her shawl askew, and her face, as always, bland.

Out of the silence Emma finally said, "What a lovely home you have here, dear. Shall we go upstairs and look at mine?"

She exclaimed joyfully over the neat little apartment. "Just right for me!" she said. "And with you downstairs for company I'll never get lonely—"

Apprehension washed over Nell like a sudden splash of cold water. "Well, I keep pretty busy all the time," she explained hastily. "Working all day, then doing my chores at night, and I've kind of taken up painting—oh, not commercially, of course, just for my own amusement though it might develop into something someday. Now about the rent, dear. As I told you, seventy-five a month for *you,* though I usually get a lot more, but I decided I just didn't want strangers up there any longer."

"Oh, yes," said Emma. And then, "But I don't guess you want a deposit of a month's rent or a lease or anything like that, do you? Being friends and all."

"No," said Nell patiently. "I don't think a lease is necessary between us. Just the month's rent."

Emma paid her. In cash. "And I promise," she added, smiling, "that I'll be very careful with the utilities so they won't add too much extra onto your expenses."

Nell thought: Who said anything about my paying the utilities?

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But she kept silent, more apprehensive now than ever.

The first month was quiet and calm and Nell could now figure on replenishing her savings account toward her retirement. Except, of course, that it wasn't a full $75 since the gas and electricity and water took up well over $10.

And it soon became apparent that Emma was far from solvent herself, so she started looking for a job. She found nothing, until finally she put an ad in the paper as baby sitter, and was repaid by a rash of answers on the telephone—Nell's telephone, of course, since Emma claimed she couldn't afford one of her own. Therefore Nell gave her a key to her own apartment and Emma ran down her outside stairs whenever the phone rang.

And at night, when Nell answered, she had to go out and call Emma who never answered until Nell had climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. If she can hear the telephone when I'm not at home, Nell asked herself, why doesn't she hear me when I call? She finally resorted to banging her broom handle on the ceiling and Emma learned that if she didn't respond Nell would simply hang up the phone.

No matter. Emma was delighted with the $2 an hour she was paid for her services, although occasionally she was called on to supply her own transportation which, of course, meant Nell's, and soon this became intolerable as Nell was expected to pick her up any time after midnight, as well as to take her earlier, and what with the telephone ringing almost constantly, Nell was soon at her wits' end. Until finally she informed Emma that she must take jobs only where transportation was provided.

"Oh," said Emma, looking downcast. "That means I'll have to lose a lot of my jobs because most of them expect me to drive myself. Maybe I could learn to drive your car?" she asked hopefully.

"No," said Nell, and that was that. Until the first of the following month when the rent was due. Emma did not offer it and finally, five days late, Nell brought up the subject.

"Oh," said Emma. "Well, dear, would it be all right if I just paid half of the rent this time and made it up later? You see, with business falling off and everything, I'm a little short of cash. Just for this month, of course," she added hastily.

Nell said, "Will next month be any better? Emma, I think you should have made your financial circumstances clearer before you pulled up stakes and came here. You told me you had an income from your brother's estate and also your Social Security that you

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took at sixty-two instead of waiting till sixty-five when you'd have gotten more, and that you felt you would have no trouble getting a job here. After all, dear, seventy-five dollars a month, utilities included, is very low rent for these days."

"Yes, I know," Emma said hurriedly, "but it's a lot more than I paid back home where I stayed with friends. Only I thought you needed me, that you were lonely and that's why you wanted me to come and keep you company, and then I thought how you might be pleased for me to help with the work in your dear little house, cleaning and cooking and laundering, and that would take care of the rent, and so everything would turn out fine."

Too late Nell remembered Emma's proclivities of the past that had earned her the name of Pollyanna Emma, who always knew that tomorrow would be sunny and happy and that everything would turn out right for little Emma. But it never had, because little Emma, being so sure of God's grace, had done little to prepare for the inevitable rainy day. "Oh, I'm sure everything will turn out for the best," Emma was always saying, and it frequently did but only because of the services of people around her.

So now she said, "I'm sure everything will turn out fine for both of us," and Nell could have slapped her. But she couldn't bear to come down too hard on her. After all, she'd given up what home she'd had (whatever *that* was) to do something she thought would help her friend. Emma couldn't pay, that was certain, and so Nell said resignedly, "All right, Emma, you can help with my place," and went back to it in despair.

So now, she thought, I have a dependent for the first time since I got my divorce.

Emma was always underfoot and always in need—she had to use the telephone, she had to go to the library, the dentist, the supermarket, everything for which she had no transportation and for which Nell did. Nell would come home tired out from her job of coping with people, her boss, her co-workers, the public; and even though she tried to be as quiet as possible, hoping for a few moments of peace, there would be Emma on her doorstep saying, "Oh, Nell dear, do you suppose you could run me down to the store—or would you have an extra can of tuna fish?" or, "Drat it, I have to go to the dentist's tomorrow, only appointment I could get was three o'clock. Do you suppose you could take a weensy bit of time off and run me to his office?"

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"Emma," said Nell, pushed to the wall, "I'm afraid this arrangement isn't going to work out very well after all—"

And then the little round face under the white bangs would grow old and pinched and frightened and Nell would sigh and say, "Well, we'll see—" and the little face would brighten with relief and things would go on as before . . .

Emma was idle and lonely. She still had a few baby-sitting jobs when the transportation was included, but the rest of her time was spent without purpose. She didn't really care much for reading, she hated any sort of handiwork, gardens did not interest her; she had no TV set nor the wherewithal to buy one since she did not even have the wherewithal to pay the rent. This last was an unmentioned, rather sordid matter that Emma refused to acknowledge, and which Nell, exhausted, would no longer bring up after the three times she had mentioned it and as a result suffered excruciatingly from guilt qualms when she'd seen the bleak frightened look on her little friend's face.

Little friend, hell, Nell said to herself. She's a *leech*! But she doesn't know it. She keeps saying that she'd do the same for me if our positions were reversed, take me in and give me a home and look out for me—she knows damn well our positions could never be reversed, but in the meantime she gets credit for being noble enough to offer her beneficence to me!

Nell was getting frantic. Emma said, at various times: The roof leaks. The heater doesn't work properly. Now that summer's here the heat is terrible, perhaps if I could have an air conditioner—?

Winter again. Emma growing plumper, Nell growing leaner. And more tired. Pitter-patter up and down the outside staircase, knocking on the door the minute Nell got home, sitting there chatting but unable to keep the disapproval out of her eyes while Nell sipped her sherry and yearned to read the paper at the same time. Why am I such a fool? Nell asked herself countless times. So, okay, I made a mistake but God knows I've paid for it over and over. Do I have to pay forever?

One wintry day Emma tapped lightly on the door and when Nell appeared she said, "Dear, could I just show you something for a minute?"

"What?" said Nell. "I'm busy with supper."

"O-oh, it smells wonderful. Swiss steak, is it? Haven't had any for years, it seems. Just scrambled eggs. Or tuna. Gets kind of tiresome."

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The wind blew a blast of cold air into Nell's cozy living room.

"What is it, Emma?" she asked impatiently. I'm damned if I'm going to ask her *again* to have supper with me. She'll end up a permanent unpaid boarder.

"Well, it's just the staircase outside. It shakes a little when I use it. That nice Mr. Brown who brought me home the other night noticed it—you know, the one with the two children I sit for, they're really darling but they do keep me busy, they get into such mischief—where was I?"

"The staircase," said Nell with foreboding. "What about it?"

"Well, Mr. Brown noticed how it shook when he took me to my door—so polite, the other fathers never do—and he said I should tell my landlady about it."

Nell went out and inspected the staircase. It did shake. The main post holding it up was beginning to rot at the bottom. Without Emma up there, she thought, I could just let the thing go and close up the apartment. Wait till I get ahead a little with my finances, and then I'll have it repaired. But not with Emma there.

She said briefly, "I'll see about it," and went into her apartment again, ignoring the mewling plea behind her, "Oh, but Nell darling—"

Shut up, said Nell to herself. Shut up!

She sat erect in her chair and cried.

And thus Nell's life became a shambles. There was now no further talk of paying the rent—Emma was always low on funds. And there were constant complaints (delicately put) of things that should be done to the apartment to make it more habitable, other things that were needed—like transportation, telephone, air conditioning, television—that would make Emma more comfortable and happy. With always the offer to take care of Nell's house, cook her meals, do her cleaning, refusing to believe Nell when she said, in a moment of exasperation, that all she wanted when she got home at night was peace and quiet and solitude, a look at the paper, and her drink in private.

"You're just saying that," said Emma, beaming her bland smile. "But I know that you just don't want an old friend like me doing menial work for you. But honestly, dear, I don't mind. I'm very independent, you know, but I like to do my share—"

Another time, a day when Nell was more exhausted than usual, Emma was waiting for her at the door. "I could hardly wait," she

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said excitedly. "I've had the most wonderful idea that would do wonders for both of us! Look, dear, it's just that— Oh, let's go in first and I'll tell you while you have your little drink—it's really a solution to everything."

There's only one solution, Nell thought drearily, and that's for you to pack up and leave. They went in.

"It's so simple," said Emma, her voice rising. "Look, I know you could use a little more money and of course I hardly have any at all, so—why don't I move into that little studio room of yours, where you paint, and rent the upstairs apartment, then we'd both be better off. We could split the rent money because I'd be giving up my own apartment, of course—"

Nell looked at her incredulously. She did not go into explanations. She simply said no, and did not speak again.

Emma left, her head bowed like a child who has been unjustly disciplined, and Nell poured herself a drink and sat trembling in her chair, her thoughts black and deep.

She spoke aloud. "This," she said, "is the living end. The absolute living *end*."

A storm rose slowly, unobserved, from the north, and then came rushing like a wild insane creature of the elements, swooping down in blackness and noise and torrents and terrible sounds until the small house shook. Nell roused and lifted her face and said, "Storm, why don't you blow off the roof of my house?" The thought felt good.

She got up finally and went outside and saw that the steps leading up to the apartment were trembling in the wind. She went to the unsteady post and examined it, the wind and rain lashing at her. Nell did not notice. She smiled and kept her hand on the fragile support, then gave it a violent shove. It moved dangerously, almost loose from its moorings, ready to go with the least pressure put upon the steps. She smiled, and went into her warm little nest, humming happily to herself.

When would Emma come? She was frightened of storms. There had been other times of wildness in the elements when she would come shivering with fear to Nell's door and plead to spend the night there. How soon? She must come now—now when the storm was raging.

Still humming, Nell went into the kitchen, got the broom, and banged its handle on the ceiling. That should fetch her.

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The storm, the wild screaming wind, pounded on the small house and shook it like an angry giant and the torrents fell and the air was filled with noise and confusion and terrifying threats; and suddenly there was another sound, the wrenching crash of the steps outside as they were torn from their moorings; and then a single human scream . . . At last, as if finally satisfied, the wind held itself in abeyance for an instant, and suddenly there was no sound at all. Just silence.

And Nell sat on, drink in hand, still smiling, still humming.

She was alone at last.

Emma did not die.

She lay in traction from head to foot in the hospital to which she had been taken. Her back had been so shattered that she was given little hope of ever being able to walk again. A wheelchair possibly, after months spent in bed.

Nell did not go to see her. Not, that is, until Emma fully regained consciousness. She went then only because the hospital called her and said that Emma was asking for her and that since she was Emma's only living relative— "I am not a relative," said Nell sharply. "I am her landlady only."

But she went. Emma smiled wanly from the bed. "Hello, dear," she said. "It's so good to see you. I'll bet you were here every day while I was unconscious."

Nell said nothing.

After a brief silence Emma said bluntly, "The bills are enormous. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Well, I'm sure the county will take care of you. They always do in cases like yours."

"County! What do you mean, county? I have never accepted charity from anyone."

Oh, no? Nell thought. No free rent, no free transportation, no free food half of the time? "And," the pathetic little voice continued, "I don't intend to start now."

"Then what *do* you propose to do?" said Nell, monumentally uninterested. "You certainly can't pay these bills yourself."

"I don't have to!" said Emma triumphantly. "You know that nice Mr. Brown who used to bring me home after I sat with his kids? Well, he's a lawyer, and he was the one who pointed out how rickety those stairs were, so he was in to see me this morning and he told me—"

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There was an uneasy silence. Then Nell said, not really wanting to know, "Well? What did he say?"

"He said," Emma explained carefully, "that you should have had those stairs fixed after I complained about them, and that undoubtedly your insurance company would come through with plenty of money to take care of me—"

There was a brief silence. Then Nell spoke. "Emma," she said carefully, "there *is* no insurance company."

"Then of course you should have had the stairs fixed. Mr. Brown inspected the hole where the post had been and he said it looked as if the post had been even more damaged than when he first saw it."

"The storm—"

"No," said Emma. "The storm knocked away the post but the hole was cement and it was broken all around the top—he said the post must have been hanging by a thread when the storm came. No insurance, hm? Well, dear, then I guess I'll just have to sue you personally."

"Sue *me*? What do you mean? You know I haven't done anything to be sued for—it would just be a waste of money on your part. You can't get blood out of a turnip. It wasn't *my* fault the storm blew down the steps, so there's no use your threatening me with a lawsuit—"

Nell's voice rose hysterically, and the impulse to murder was there in her hands. She could almost feel them moving of their own volition, twisting in her lap, struggling to be free in order to silence this hateful creature forever.

"I have nothing, do you hear?" she cried, her voice rising out of control. "Nothing!"

"Well, then, what am I to do?" said Emma helplessly. "And of course you have something, dear. Your little house—you told me once it was free and clear—and your car and your little, or big, savings account that you plan for when you retire— Oh dear me, yes, you have a lot and of course it is only fair for you to take care of me for the rest of my life since you ought to have had the stairs fixed, you ought to have had the stairs fixed, you ought to . . ." She smiled contentedly, and dozed off.

"Q"

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A tale for all seasons . . .

THE THREE TRAVELLERS

by R. L. STEVENS

Now the three had journeyed several days when at last they came upon the Oasis of Ziza, and Gaspar who was the wisest of them said, "We will rest our horses here this night. It will be safe."

"Safe for horses and men," Melchior agreed. "But what of the gold?"

"Safe for the gold also. No one knows we carry it."

The sun was low in the western sky as they approached, and Gaspar held up a hand to shield his eyes. It would be night soon.

A young herdsman came out to meet them and take their horses. And he said, "Welcome to the Oasis of Ziza. Have you ridden far?"

"A full moon's journey," Gaspar replied, speaking in the nomadic tongue. "What is your name?"

And the herdsman answered, "They call me Ramoth, sire."

"Here is a gold coin for you, Ramoth. Feed and water our mounts for the journey and another will be yours on the morrow."

"Which way do you travel, sire?"

"Toward the west," Gaspar said, purposely vague.

When the young herdsman had departed with the horses, fat Balthazar said, "I am not pleased, Gaspar. You lead us, it is true, but the keeping of the gold is my responsibility. And travellers guided by the heavens would do well to journey by night."

"The desert is cold by night, my friend. Let us cease this bickering and settle ourselves here till the dawn."

Then Melchior and Balthazar went off to put up their tent, and Gaspar was much relieved. It had been a long journey, not yet ended, and he treasured these moments alone. Presently he set off to inspect the oasis where they would spend the night, and he came upon a stranger who wore a sword at his waist.

"Greetings, traveller," the man said. "I am Nevar, of the northern tribe. Do you journey this route often?"

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"Not often, no. My name is Gaspar and I come with my two companions from the east."

Nevar nodded, and stroked his great growth of beard. "Later, when the sun is gone, there are games of chance—and women for those who have the gold to pay."

"That does not interest me," Gaspar said.

"You will find the companionship warming," Nevar said. "Come to the fire near the well. That is where we will be."

Gaspar went on, pausing to look at the beads and trinkets the nomad traders offered. When he reached the well at the far end of the oasis, he saw a woman lifting a great earthen jar to her shoulder. She was little more than a child, and as he watched, the jar slipped from her grasp and shattered against the stones, splashing her with water. She burst into tears.

"Come, child," Gaspar said, comforting her. "There is always another jar to be had."

And she turned her wide brown eyes to him, revealing a beauty he had not seen before. "My father will beat me," she said.

"Here is a gold coin for him. Tell him a stranger named Gaspar bumped you and made the jar break."

"That would not be true."

"But it is true that I am Gaspar. Who are you?"

"Thantia, daughter of Nevar."

"Yes, I have met your father. You are very lovely, my child."

But his words seemed to frighten her, and she ran from him.

Then he returned to the place where Melchior had erected their tent. They had learned from past encampments to leave nothing of value with the horses, and Gaspar immediately asked the location of the gold.

"It is safe," Balthazar told him. "Hidden in the bottom of this grain bag."

"Good. And the perfume?"

"With our regular supplies. No one would steal that."

Melchior chuckled. "If they did, we could smell out the culprits quickly enough!"

And then Balthazar said, "There is gaming to-night, near the well."

"I know," Gaspar replied. "But it is not for us."

The fat man held out his hands in a gesture of innocence. "We could but look," he said.

And Gaspar reluctantly agreed. "Very well."

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Later, when the fire had been kindled and the people of Ziza came forth from their tents to mingle, the three travellers joined them. Almost at once Gaspar was sought out by a village elder, a man with wrinkled skin and rotting teeth. "I am Dibon," he said, choosing a seat next to Gaspar. "Do you come from the east?"

"Yes, from Persia."

"A long journey. What brings you this far?"

Gaspar did not wish to answer. Instead, he motioned towards a group of men with small smooth stones before them. "What manner of sport is this?"

"It is learned from the Egyptians, as are most things sinful." Then the old man leaned closer, and Gaspar could smell the foul odor of his breath. "Some say you are a magus."

"I have studied the teachings of Zoroaster, as have my companions. In truth some would consider me a magus."

"Then you journey in search of Mazda?"

"In search of truth," Gaspar replied.

Then he felt the presence of someone towering over him, and saw it was the figure of Nevar. His right hand rested on the sword at his waist. "I would have words with you, Gaspar."

"What troubles you?"

"My only daughter Thantia, a virgin not yet twenty, tells me you gave her a gold coin to-day."

"Only because I feared the broken water jug was my fault."

"No stranger approaches Thantia! You will leave Ziza this night!"

"We leave in the morning," Gaspar said quietly.

Nevar drew his sword, and Gaspar waited no longer. He flung himself at the big man and they tumbled towards the fire as the game-players scattered. Gaspar pulled Nevar's sword from his grip.

Then Thantia broke from the crowd, running to her father. "This stranger did me no harm!" she cried out.

"Silence, daughter!" Nevar reached for a piece of burning firewood and hurled it at Gaspar, but it went wide of its mark and landed on a low straw roof nearby.

"The stable!" someone shouted, and Gaspar saw it was the herdsman Ramoth hurrying to rescue the horses. The others helped to quench the flames with water from the well, but not before a quantity of feed and supplies had been destroyed.

Than Gaspar and Melchior went in search of fat Balthazar, who

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had disappeared during the commotion. They found him behind the row of tents, playing the Egyptian stone game with a half dozen desert riders. He had a small pile of gold coins before him.

"This must cease!" Gaspar commanded.

The nomads ran at his words, and Balthazar struggled to his feet. "It was merely a game."

"Our task is far more important than mere gaming," Gaspar reminded him, and the fat man looked sheepish. "While you idled I was near killed by the swordsman Nevar."

"A trouble-maker," Balthazar agreed. "I will not rest easy until Ziza is behind us on our journey."

Then as they passed the burned stable on the way to their tent, old Dibon approached them saying, "This ruin is your fault, Gaspar. Yours and Nevar's."

"That is true, old man. We will stay here to-morrow and help rebuild the stable."

Dibon bowed his head. "A generous offer. We thank you."

But when they were alone, Balthazar complained, "This will delay us an entire day!"

"We will travel a distance by night, as you wished."

Now another surprise was waiting at their tent. As Melchior raised the flap to enter, there was a whimper from within. Gaspar pushed past his hesitating companion and lit the oil lamp. By its glow they saw the girl Thantia crouched behind a pile of robes.

"Please!" she gasped. "Please hide me. My father has beaten me and I fear for my life!"

"I fear for ours if he finds you here," Melchior said.

Gaspar held the oil lamp closer and saw the bruises on her face and arms. "We cannot send you back to him. Remain here with Melchior and Balthazar. I will return shortly."

Then he made his way to the place where old Dibon rested, and he told the elder what had happened. Dibon nodded and said, "My daughter and her husband will find room for Thantia until Nevar regains his senses. You were wise to come to me."

Gaspar and his companions delivered the girl to Dibon, and went with them to the dwelling place of Dibon's daughter. Later, in their tent, Balthazar grumbled again about the delayed departure. But they settled down at last to sleep, as the fires of the encampment burned low around them.

In the morning, by the first rays of the rising sun, Gaspar was awakened by Balthazar's panic-filled voice. "Wake quickly, Gas-

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par!" he pleaded, shaking him. "Someone has stolen our gold!"

Gaspar saw at once that the words were true.

The leather sack of grain contained only grain now. Though the tent showed no sign of forced entry, and though their regular supplies were untouched, the gold had vanished.

"I cannot believe it!" Melchior gasped. "How could a thief have entered while we slept?"

Gaspar agreed such a thing was impossible. "The gold was stolen before we retired last night," he reasoned. "We were away from the tent during the gaming and fire, and again while escorting Thantia. A thief could have entered at either time."

"What of the perfume and incense?" Melchior asked.

"Untouched," Balthazar said. "My special knot is still in place on the other bags."

"Only the gold," Gaspar mused.

"It is truly as if someone knew where to look."

"The girl!" Balthazar exclaimed. "We found her in here! She could have searched for the gold and found it."

"Possible," Gaspar admitted. "But I cannot bring myself to believe it."

"We cannot leave Ziza without the gold," Melchior said.

"Let us put our minds to the problem while we work at the stable," Gaspar said.

Now when they reached the stable Nevar was already there, toiling with the others. He paused in his labors when he saw the three, and shot an accusing finger at Gaspar. "You have stolen away my daughter. I will revenge myself!"

"Your daughter is safe, in the care of Dibon and his family."

His words quieted Nevar, but Melchior asked, "If he was so concerned, why did he not come after us in the night?"

Balthazar agreed. "Or did he come, and steal our gold away?"

Then presently old Dibon appeared, with the girl Thantia at his side. She cast not a glance in her father's direction, and he went about his work ignoring her. Gaspar laboured diligently through the morning, instructing Dibon and the others in Persian building techniques. He too ignored Nevar, not wanting more trouble.

Once, while Balthazar was off to the well for water, Melchior whispered, "Is it possible that our companion betrays us, Gaspar? Might he have stolen the gold himself to cover his losses at the stone game?"

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But Gaspar would hear none of it. "We must never doubt each other, Melchior. In my heart I know Balthazar is innocent, as I know you are innocent. And remember the scene at the stone game. There were gold coins in front of him. He was winning, not losing."

"How will we recover the gold, Gaspar?"

"Through the power of our minds, Melchior. We are wise men, and we must use our minds to determine the thief's identity."

"But there is no clue to his identity!"

"Sometimes the lack of a clue can be one."

Balthazar returned with the water and they drank eagerly. Later as they ate of their supplies, Thantia came to them. "I thank you for helping me," she said. "The elders have spoken to my father and he has promised never again to beat me. I will return to him now."

"We need no thanks," Gaspar assured her.

Then old Dibon came to join them. "How may we repay you for your work on the stable?"

"You may recover our stolen gold," Balthazar blurted out.

"Gold? Stolen gold?"

"It was stolen from our tent," Balthazar hurried on, before Gaspar could silence him.

"There are no thieves in Ziza!"

"There is one."

"I will summon the elders. We will search for your gold."

"No, no," said Gaspar. "We will recover it."

"But how?"

"By finding the thief. It is best to say nothing and catch him off guard."

Old Dibon bowed his head. "I will do as you suggest."

"One favour. Could you ask that our horses be brought to us? We must appear to be leaving."

Then, as they waited, Balthazar gathered their supplies. And Melchior said, "I have put my mind to the problem, Gaspar. But there are too many possibilities. The girl Thantia could be the thief, or her father Nevar. Or any of the game players."

"Or old Dibon himself," Balthazar added. "There are too many to suspect."

Gaspar nodded. "What is needed is an oracle."

"You mean to kill a beast as the Romans do?"

Gaspar shook his head. "My oracle will be a living animal." He

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saw the herdsman Ramoth leading their horses. "My steed will tell me who has our gold."

"Your horse!" fat Balthazar laughed. "Who learns anything from a dumb animal?"

Gaspar held out some grain for the horse. "You see how he eats? He is hungry."

"What does that tell us?" Melchior asked.

"That our gold was stolen by Ramoth!"

It was after Dibon spoke to Ramoth that the young herdsman confessed his crime and begged forgiveness. When the missing gold had been returned to Gaspar's hands, the others questioned him.

"How did you know it was Ramoth?" Melchior asked. "We barely spoke to the youth."

"My horse told me, as I told you he would. The horse was hungry, so had not been fed. You see, the thief never touched our other supplies, never unfastened Balthazar's special knot. How could he have found the gold so easily, without searching for it? But the gold was hidden in a sack of grain, and after the fire destroyed the stable, Ramoth came in search of feed for our horses. He came while we were away, and looked in only one place—the grain bag. Feeling the weight of it, his fingers reached through the grain and came upon the gold. He stole it, but then could not take the grain lest we realize he was the thief. So the horses went hungry."

"You are a wise man, Gaspar," Balthazar conceded.

"As we all are. Come, let us mount."

"It will be dark soon," Melchior said.

Gaspar nodded. "We will get our bearings from the star."

Dibon was by the well to wish them farewell. "Ramoth will be punished," he promised.

"Show mercy," Gaspar said.

"Do you ride west with your gold?"

"West with gifts for a King. Gold and frankincense and myrrh."

"Good journey," Dibon said.

He watched them for a long time, until the three vanished from sight over the desert wastes.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

GUY OWEN

This is Guy Owen's first story to appear in EQMM, and it comes to us with distinguished credentials. The author was born and educated in North Carolina, getting his Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He has taught at Davidson College, Elon College, and Stetson University, and has been writer-in-residence at Appalachian State University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Currently he is Professor of English at North Carolina State University, where he also edits "Southern Poetry Review." He has published articles on, among other poets, T.S. Eliot and John Crowe Ransom, and his four novels include THE BALLAD OF THE FLIM-FLAM MAN, *made into an award-winning movie, and* JOURNEY FOR JOEDEL, *nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Winner of prestigious awards, Guy Owen now lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with his wife Dorothy and their two sons.*

"The Corn Thief" is a regional story, as authentic as the sight and smell of newly shucked corn, and brimming with (to use one of Anthony Boucher's favorite critical words) "lovely" naturalistic detail . . .

THE CORN THIEF

by GUY OWEN

I hadn't used up but one week of my month on Grandpa Eller's farm when the corn thief came for the first time. I was the first one to find it out, too. That morning I got up early and put on my blue jeans and new chambray shirt. Already I heard the catbirds and mockers fussing in the chinaberry tree, and somewhere in the pasture towards the old sawmill site a mourning dove was calling.

I slept on a cot in Grandpa's room, so I moved about easy and

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slipped out to the back yard barefooted. I was twelve years old and nothing in the world pleased me more than having my grandfather brag on me.

But when I went to the corncrib to shell the corn for the domineckers in the chicken run, I let out a whoop that must have waked up all of Cape Fear County. The lock had been pried off the facing and the door was flung wide-open. Wolf, the old one-eyed German shepherd that always smelled of mange medicine, was sniffing about the crib door, whining.

"Grandpa," I hollered, "come quick. We've purely been robbed!"

"What's come over you, Joel?" He was already hurrying across the back yard, stopping under the worm-eaten catalpa tree to hitch the galluses on his blue overalls. Without his felt hat on, his thin hair was white as snow in the morning sunlight. His face was seamed and old—all except his periwinkle eyes—and his short legs moved like a beagle's. I remembered then what Mama had said about him being too old to look after me, especially since he'd already had a stroke.

Ransom Martin, the new hired man, came scurrying out from the packhouse behind Grandpa, stretching his long legs. "What's all the commotion about?"

When Grandpa leaned in the crib door, he wasn't much taller than me. His sleepy eyes squinted, studying the pile of unshucked corn. "He didn't take much," he said, "whoever he was. Not more than a sackful he could tote on his back." His voice was matter-of-fact and he didn't seem excited at all.

"Let's call Sheriff Slade, Grandpa," I suggested. "If he can't come he'd be sure to send a deputy."

"Shoot, boy," Ranse spoke up quick. "Make him drive all the way from Queen City for one sack of weevily corn?"

Grandpa agreed that it wouldn't be necessary to call the Sheriff from the county seat.

"What you aim to do, Cap'n Jim?" Ranse asked, cornering his greenish eyes at my grandfather.

"First thing I figger to do," Grandpa said, calmly looking at the hired hand, "is get me a brand-new lock. A big one. And I reckon I'll tie old Wolf someplace close by tonight."

"I could stand guard with my new twenty-two," I volunteered.

But they didn't pay me any mind, Ranse and Grandpa.

"That old dog," Ranse said, "he ain't no 'count." He spat tobacco juice toward the scalding barrel where a few chickens were

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scratching in last season's hog hairs and new mule-hoof parings. "He ought to be shot and put out of his misery."

When I turned around, Grandpa's housekeeper was standing by Ranse. Myrtle's face was puffy and she acted as if she was mad from being waked up by all the hollering and whooping. Ranse told her about the stolen corn.

"I'm not surprised a bit in this world," she said. "I heard something. I kept hearing something the whole enduring night." Then she looked at Wolf and made a face. "He's too old to keep any thieves away. He's not fit for anything but to eat biscuits and carry fleas."

Grandpa stooped to pat Wolf. "You live long enough, you'll be old too one day," he said to Myrtle in a low voice. "Just because something's old don't mean it's worthless."

"I brought my rifle, Grandpa," I broke in. "I could stand guard on the back porch tonight."

"We'll wait and see, Joel."

Before we turned away, Ranse said, "I know a way to stop that thief."

"How's that, Mr. Martin?" I asked. For some reason I didn't like to call him "Mister." I'd seen the way he had of rubbing against the housekeeper when he thought they were alone.

But Grandpa was walking away. "I reckon me and Joel here'll get that lock."

Which is what we did. That evening, after we finished grading tobacco in the packhouse, we rode to the store at Eller's Bend in Grandpa's rattletrap Studebaker and bought the biggest lock that Uncle Sam Eller had in stock.

"Jim, you trying to keep something in or out with that all-fired lock?"

Since there were a few customers in the store, Grandpa didn't say anything, just sort of smiled. He bought me a nickel sack of peppermint sticks and a box of shells for my .22. Then we drove on back and I helped him nail the new lock on the crib door.

For all the good it did. Because next morning we saw that the corn thief had come again and made off with another sack of corn. And Wolf, who was tied close by, hadn't barked once. It was puzzling. I knew the German shepherd was getting blind; maybe he was almost deaf, too.

"What'd I tell you, Cap'n Jim?" Ranse said with a knowing grin. "If that sorry no-'count dog was mine I'd shoot him, sure."

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That night I slept in the barn loft with Grandpa, waiting for the corn thief to return. Lying awake on the sweet-smelling oats, I did a lot of thinking. One thing I decided, quick enough, was this: I wouldn't write Mama about the thief that plagued us, slipping about the farm so quiet in the night that Wolf wouldn't even bark at him. I wouldn't tell her because she didn't want me to spend July with Grandpa in the first place, since Grandma had died and Grandpa had been in the hospital and had to hire Myrtle for his housekeeper. But I reasoned that Grandpa needed me more than ever and in the end I convinced her.

It wasn't Grandpa's idea to sleep in the barn loft; it was Myrtle's notion. She kept pestering him about it, in that scratchy voice of hers, until he gave in, maybe just to get some peace. And, of course, I went along. The truth of the matter is, I sort of sided with Myrtle—though I didn't like her at all, even if she was Mama's second cousin once removed. She was too bossy and sulky, and she never kept tea cakes in the stove warmer the way Grandma used to do. Not to mention coconut pies and pound cake in the food safe.

But Ranse Martin, the hired hand that slept on a cot in the packhouse, had his own plan. "You listen to me now, Cap'n Jim. I'll fix a trap with that double-barrel twelve-gauge of yours that'll take care of the lowdown thief."

The housekeeper was clearing away the supper dishes. "You might pay Ranse some mind now, Jim Eller," she said. She was a short woman, with frizzly hair dyed the color of cornsilk, except for the dark roots. Like Grandma, she dipped snuff, but she wasn't clean with it. Sometimes her lips and teeth were stained with Sweet Society snuff.

"I wouldn't want to harm a man just for a shirt-tail full of corn."

Nor for the whole cribful, I thought. That's the kind of man Grandpa is. He was a gentle soft-spoken man.

Anyhow, when it was good and dark, we took our two guns and a flashlight and climbed up the ladder in the aisle of the barn. We took two old raggedy patchwork quilts and some of the tow-sack sheets used to spread over the cured tobacco, and made ourselves beds. Grandpa raked up a thick mattress of oat hay and we put two bales of peanut hay in front of our heads at the open loft door to rest our guns on. Grandpa said we'd keep our shells in our pockets; we wouldn't load unless we heard the thief coming.

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Then we stretched out, talking low for a little while. I watched the fireflies blink on and off and the heat lightning off in the distance towards Clayton. Millions of stars were out like shiny bits of mica and the moon was like a quartered cantaloupe. The light was so clear I could see the corncrib, which set off a little ways from the big barn, almost like it was day. I aimed my .22 towards the board window, pretending it was loaded and clicking my tongue against the roof of my mouth for a shot.

"You think the thief will come back, Grandpa?"

"I don't know, son," he said. "It's not likely he'll come tonight. Some other night maybe."

"If he comes, we won't shoot him, will we?"

"No, we won't shoot. It would be a terrible thing to shoot a man for a few bushels of corn. A man whose family may be hungry."

"Ranse, he doesn't think it would be wrong to shoot him."

"Every man to his own notions."

"We'll just capture him, then, won't we, and holler for Myrtle to call Sheriff Slade?"

"That sounds like a mighty good plan. But you ought to get a little sleep now. You've got a lot of tobacco to take off the sticks in the morning. We've got to get that curing ready for the auction."

But I couldn't begin to sleep. "Don't you think we ought to keep guard, I mean stay awake in shifts so we wouldn't miss him—if he comes?" That was the way they did in all the books I read.

But Grandpa said it wasn't necessary. He told me he'd propped some old tin cans against the door. If anybody broke in the crib, we'd be bound to hear and wake up.

But I made up my mind I'd stay awake all night by myself, and for a long time I did, after Grandpa was alseep on the oat mattress. Once when the quartered moon was way up high, I thought I heard something in the barnyard. I gripped my rifle and peered over the bale of hay. But it was nothing but a barn owl looking for mice.

After that I eased back down and scrooched under the quilt. A breeze was rising from the Cape Fear River and it was cool. For a while I lay awake on my back, smelling the oats and listening to the breathing of the brindled cow in the stable below.

Towards midnight in the hayloft I started getting sleepy. Then, before I knew it, it seemed like a hoot owl had lifted the woods up and was carrying them far, far away . . .

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Grandpa woke me, shaking my shoulder. "Joel," he called gently. Then we went down the cobwebby ladder together. I pumped a basin of water, then we washed up. Just as Grandpa always did, I sloshed the cold water on my face, drying with the towel hanging on the nail.

"We'll sleep out again tonight, won't we, Gramp?" I asked.

"Maybe. We'll wait and see, son." He looked tired and there were worry lines around his pale eyes.

When we went in to eat breakfast, Ranse Martin and Myrtle were already sitting at the kitchen table. Like Myrtle, Ranse was from Queen City, and she had hired him herself on the spur of the moment when the old hired man quit while Grandpa was in the hospital. I suppose Josh Shipman got tired of Myrtle's sharp tongue or hard biscuits, maybe both.

Anyway, she sent for Ranse to help her tend the crops, claiming him for her dead sister's brother-in-law. One thing sure, he didn't know anything much about farming. He told me he'd been in the transportation business, but I found out all he did was drive a taxi. I heard Uncle Sam Eller say he probably sold a little moonshine on the side.

Now the hired man smiled and put his coffee down on the checked oilcloth. "He come back?" he asked. When he smiled you could see his stained teeth, and his reddish mustache bristled beneath his hawk's nose. He wore his dark hair long and combed it so it covered a bald spot on the crown of his head.

Myrtle heaved up then and got our eggs and grits from the stove warmer. They were cold, but the biscuit toast was good and the coffee was strong and hot.

Pouring my coffee, she said, "I bet a silver dollar you two went to sleep before ten o'clock out yonder. A thief could—"

Grandpa saucered his black coffee and said, "Well, at least there's no corn gone."

The new lock hadn't been touched.

"Sure we went to sleep. We didn't have any notion he'd come back again so soon." I set to eating then, hungry from staying awake to guard the corncrib.

But Grandpa just picked at his breakfast like there was a spider in his plate. I could see he was pondering something.

"Well," Myrtle fussed, "I'd like to know what you figger to do."

"Maybe he's got all he needs now," Grandpa said.

"Maybe he heard us in the barn loft," I chimed in, "and will

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stay away for good." I started to tell them about the big barn owl but I thought better of it.

Myrtle just snorted.

Ranse commenced, "Look here now, Cap'n Jim, me and you just better set us that trap this evening when we knock off." He seemed to grin and his lips were pulled back from his gums.

"No, not yet. I wouldn't want to harm—"

"Hunh, I think it's a time you listened to Ranse, Jim Eller, and quit being stubborn as a iron-headed mule."

"It's just a few bushels of corn, Myrtle," I said.

"Who pulled your chain, Mr. Big Britches?"

"That's it," Ranse persisted. "That's all it is now, but mind you when a thief gets to stealing like that, there's no telling what he'll wind up taking. To my way of thinking he's got to be stopped."

"And I'm not going to set still," Myrtle said, her voice rising, "while some low-lived scoundrel steals us out of house and home. I'm not about to."

She sounded like she already owned the place, which someday she would. Grandpa had willed the house to her after he got sick, so he would have someone to take care of him and wouldn't be a burden to his daughters. I had heard Mama fussing with Papa against it, though Myrtle was her own blood kin.

"I'm glad she's no kin of mine," Papa had said.

Myrtle commenced to pout but Grandpa didn't appear to pay her any mind.

But we had to listen all over again to Ranse telling about how him and his uncle once cured a corn thief. How they rigged up a shotgun in the crib, and when the man opened the door that night, it blew one of his legs nearly off.

"Simple as shooting a dove on a fence post," Ranse said, winking at me.

I gave him a sharp look. Grandpa had taught me never to shoot a bird unless it was on the wing, never to take unfair advantage of any creature, wild or tame.

Grandpa pushed back from the table. "I'll give it some thought." He stood for a minute in the doorway studying the two of them, his face older than I'd ever remembered it being.

"You do that thing, Cap'n Jim," Ranse said, slapping the table. "I tell you there's more than one way to catch a thief."

That night we slept in the hayloft again and this time I sneaked a bullet in the chamber of my rifle.

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When we woke up, it was long past daylight. My mouth dropped open when I saw the door to the corncrib was open. The thief had pried open the new lock, maybe with a crowbar, just like before. But that wasn't all: along with the corn, a power saw was gone from the tool shed. And we hadn't heard a whimper out of Wolf.

Ranse Martin was standing on the back porch grinning at us when we came down. "What'd I tell you all yesterday? You wouldn't listen to me before. I reckon you will now." He actually seemed happy the thief had come back again.

All that morning I worked hard in the packhouse. I had a notion I wanted to try out. I took the tobacco off the sticks as fast as I could, throwing the empty sticks out the window and piling the bright leaves beside Grandpa. He was grading the tobacco near the open door, holding the spread leaves up close to his eyes before dropping them into one of the three piles on the grading bench in front of him.

When I had taken off enough tobacco to last until past noon and swept up the broken stems and twine, I told Grandpa I was going to take the .22 and look for a rabbit over by the old millpond.

"You better be careful in them woods, boy," Ranse said. "I'd stay out of them woods if I was you. I seen a great big rattler near that dam, not more than three days ago." He was sitting near Myrtle, tying the tobacco in big awkward hanks.

"Your mama told me she didn't want you traipsing around—" the housekeeper began. She was tying the best grade, wearing a white sack apron to keep the sand off her flowery dress.

But I caught Grandpa's eye, and I didn't pay them any attention.

"Here, Wolf," I called, standing in the packhouse door.

Then the dog and I struck out across the pasture towards the woods. Grandpa knew I wasn't just out for any rabbit. Wolf must have sensed it, too, from the way he wagged his tail and kept his gray muzzle to the ground, sniffing and whining. Anybody would have thought he was a spry pup and not an old half-blind, nearly toothless dog.

We tracked the corn thief for nearly a mile. I could have done it without Wolf, the signs were so clear. I could see where he'd gone down the side of the cow lane, mashing down a fennel here and there or rabbit tobacco or ragweed. When he got to the woods behind the barn, he climbed the fence and turned north, headed, I gues-

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sed, for the old sawmill road that led to the Wilmington highway.

Presently Wolf sniffed all around in a clump of sumac and blackberries, then, looking back at me, headed up the dry creek bed, into the woods towards the old sawmill. I gripped my rifle and trotted after him, scaring up a hermit thrush.

In ten minutes we left the scrub oak and poplar and ran into the cut-over pine. I was glad I'd put on my straw hat then, because the sun was hot. Sweat trickled down my ribs and the pine needles felt warm and soft under my bare feet. They were good to smell, too. A squirrel fussed at me, but I just waved and smiled at him.

When we came out into the clearing, Wolf barked and dashed ahead. I ran after him, crossing the old lumber yard. A blue-tailed lizard sat gulping the sunshine on the pile of rotting slabs and a catbird flew up from eating blueberries.

When I walked around the slab pile, you could have bowled me over with a feather.

There was the stolen corn!

I took off my hat and squatted own, putting my arm around the dog's neck. His nose was wet and he was panting, with his tongue hanging out. "You may be old," I told him, "but you can still track a thief."

All the corn was there. The thief had dumped it in a sunken place at the foot of the sawdust pile and raked down sawdust over it. But he hadn't nearly covered it up. I guess he figured nobody would look for corn in an old sawdust pile. Either that or he was in a big hurry. The dog and I searched all around, under strips and old slabs covered with vines, but we didn't find Grandpa's power saw.

That evening, after we'd packed the graded and tied tobacco down and covered it with old quilts, Grandpa and me took our guns and headed for the sawmill site. The guns were just for show, because we decided to keep my discovery a secret.

Grandpa stood watching Wolf scratch at the pile of stolen corn. He took off his sweaty felt hat, scratched his head, and spit a glob of tobacco juice onto the sawdust pile.

"Don't that beat bobtail?" I said. "What do you make of it, Gramp?"

He just grunted and studied the situation a while, his eyes disturbed.

"Ain't that some kind of funny stealing?" I asked.

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Grandpa said maybe whoever it was intended to hide the corn there until he had a wagonload. Then some night they would cut the wire fence and drive a wagon in and take it out by the old logcart road.

On the way back he said, "Then again, maybe they didn't really intend to steal that corn, Joel."

Which was a puzzle to me. But I didn't have time to ask any more questions, because just then Myrtle was calling us to supper, her voice as screechy as ever.

At the supper table Ranse said, "I reckon you'll listen to me now that thief has stole something worth as much as a power saw. I already got the stuff ready to set our little trap."

As usual Myrtle set in to backing him up, fussing and whining. I figured one reason Grandpa gave in finally was to get a moment's peace from the two of them.

"It might be the best thing after all," Grandpa said, looking away from me. "I just hope he won't come back."

I was sure surprised to hear him agree to the trap. It wasn't like him to do such a thing.

"Now you're talking sense for once," Ranse said, squinting at Myrtle, whose lips were quirked in a smile.

I guess Ranse Martin expected to get his way, sooner or later, because he had all the stuff ready. He'd nailed a board to a stanchion in the middle of the corn pile, with a V sawed in it to cradle the shotgun barrel. The stock rested on the corn. He had another board with a spool contraption fixed to it.

When Grandpa climbed up on the dwindling pile of unshucked corn and settled the gun, Ranse tightened the strong twine he had braided that ran to a staple in the door and slipped the loop over both triggers. Then he shifted the old twelve-gauge shotgun until it aimed where he wanted it.

"Now, boy, you slip out that window and open the door."

I did. And when I eased the crib door open I heard the two clicks, one right after the other.

Grandpa took the claw hammer then and knocked the board with the V in it loose and nailed it back six inches lower. That way, if the shotgun went off, it would hit the thief in the legs, not in the chest. All this time he never looked me in the eye.

At least, I thought, he's showing that much mercy.

Ranse squatted close by, his bald spot under a string of red peppers dangling from a rafter. He watched Grandpa with nar-

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rowed eyes. "Suit yourself, Cap'n Jim. You're the boss, but I sure wouldn't show him no mercy, a thief like that."

Grandpa said, "The Bible tells us to temper justice with mercy."

"Well, get me them shells now," Ranse said gruffly.

"I'll get them, Grandpa," I volunteered.

"Yeah, let Big Britches there fetch 'em."

"No," Grandpa said. "I'll get them myself, Joel. I know where they are."

"Hurry now," Ranse said. "We'll get ourselves a thief if he dares come back. I tell you, the time me and my uncle . . ."

But Grandpa had already gone, walking towards the house on his short legs, the back of his shirt stained with sweat.

It was almost dark now and the last domineckers had already gone to roost. The hired man and I waited in the corncrib about 15 minutes, not saying anything. Somewhere in the pile of corn a mouse was gnawing steadily.

Finally Ranse took to popping his knuckles. "What in the name of the devil's keeping him?"

"I hear him coming now."

"The Cap'n's just gettin' old," he said. "He's old like that mangy dog, livin' on borrowed time."

"Grandpa's not old," I said. "He's not as old as you think, leastwise."

When Grandpa came back with the two shells, Ranse was fidgeting nervously with the gun.

"What kept you so long?" he said, reaching for the shells.

Grandpa didn't answer him. Instead, he clambered up the pile of corn. "I'll load it myself," he said.

I watched closely as Grandpa squatted and slipped the two shells into the chamber and flicked the safety catch off.

Ranse stooped and adjusted the gun until the twine was stretched as tight as a guitar string. "I double guarantee you that won't miss."

Then we slid down the corn pile and climbed out of the window. Grandpa swung the heavy board window to and twisted the wooden latch.

"What if he comes in the window?" I asked.

"Heck," Ranse said. "Ain't he always come to the door?"

"Maybe he's got all the corn he needs," Grandpa said quietly.

That night, of course, we slept in our beds for a change. There was no reason to guard the corncrib. Grandpa turned out the

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light, after reading a chapter in his old Bible, and pretty soon I heard him snoring away.

In a little while the housekeeper and Ranse turned off the radio in the parlor and went out on the front porch. I heard them talking and laughing, kind of low, rocking on the end of the porch shaded by the chinaberry tree.

I sneaked to the window, and when I peeked out I saw Ranse and Myrtle sitting close together in their rocking chairs. He had his arm on her shoulder.

As soon as Myrtle turned the lights out after Ranse, I slipped out of the cot and put on my shirt and blue jeans. Grandpa was breathing quietly and I didn't disturb him.

On the back porch I picked up my .22 and tiptoed out into the moonlit yard. I put my shoes on sitting on the back steps. Then I climbed the ladder up to the barn loft and stretched out on the oats, with my rifle resting on the bale of hay. If any thief came, I made up my mind I'd capture him first, before he got blown to smithereens by Ranse's devilish trap.

I reckon my intentions were good, but, like before, I dozed off sometime before daybreak. And that made a lot of difference.

Anyhow, when I woke up it was good daylight. I guess what woke me then was Grandpa's brogans, because when I looked down he was walking towards the corncrib, his face half hid by his old felt hat. He stopped at the crib door and tested the lock. I saw that it hadn't been broken. Then he walked slowly around to the board window.

I was just about to surprise him and call out, when I stopped. What made me keep still was this: I happened to glance towards the smokehouse, and there was Ranse Martin squatting down and looking over the stacks of stove wood. It looked curious. I couldn't puzzle out what he was hiding for, so I scrooched back under the oats beside my rifle.

But I could still see Grandpa standing by the crib window. He didn't open it right away. The shoats in the pigpen commenced squealing and I heard him speak to them gently. Then he looked all around, finally towards the packhouse where Ranse slept. He spit out some tobacco juice and reached for the latch on the board window.

The minute he put pressure on that latch I sensed something was wrong. Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed Ranse Martin stand up by the smokehouse, and I felt the hackles on my neck

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rise. But it was too late to warn Grandpa.

Because as soon as he pulled on the window the shotgun exploded near his head and the shot echoed in the woods behind me. For a second Grandpa seemed to clutch at the window sill. His fingernails scrabbled against the rough boards as his body slumped down, and then he sprawled out beside the crib. One arm was flung over his head and his old felt hat was still on. He didn't budge.

My heart was thumping against a button and I was weak as skimmed milk. I just lay still for a minute, listening to the pigs squealing and the mules stamping below in their stalls. Then I told myself I had to go down. If Grandpa wasn't dead, I would have to help him.

That's when I saw Ranse, and I ducked my head back and kept still as a mouse. He was walking past the woodpile, his shotgun held down by his side. His eyes looked puffy, and there was a smile on his thin lips.

For a minute he stood in front of the corncrib. I heard a door slam, and then Myrtle was running across the back yard. "Is it all right, Ranse?" she cried.

He waited for her. "Hush now," he said. He put his arm around her waist and together they walked around the edge of the crib, with Ranse keeping the shotgun down by his side, away from the pudgy housekeeper. I watched them studying Grandpa's body. I could hear every word they said, and it was enough to turn my blood cold.

"Well, Myrt, what'd I tell you now?"

"I don't want to think of anything going wrong, hon."

Ranse patted her on the rump. "All you got to say is the old man set the trap and then forgot about it and killed himself. Everybody knows he's not been himself since that stroke. Leastwise, nobody's going to guess I turned the gun to cover the window instead of the door. And that house there is all yours—ours."

"I reckon you know best. But I feel so sorry for— Oh, I do hope nothing goes wrong."

"There's nothing to go wrong, I've been tellin' you."

"But what about the boy? He saw you-all—"

"I've thought about that, too," Ranse said, tapping his head with a finger. "I'll just say the old man changed his mind and we reset the trap to cover the window."

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Then I heard her scream. Ranse put his hand up to her mouth, but it didn't help. She cut loose as loud as the shotgun had, louder.

But what made her holler was enough to stop the tears in my eyes.

It was Grandpa. He was getting up. I saw him rise to his knees, and then he stood up, with the two of them gaping at him and Myrtle's shoulders shaking.

He turned to face them, but he wasn't in any hurry to speak. I watched him brush the dirt off his work shirt and khaki trousers. There was a little smile on his lean face as he took off his felt hat and wiped the white hair away from his forehead. He was standing up straight, and in the morning light he didn't look so weak or old any more.

Ranse blurted out, "We—Cap'n, we thought you was shot. I'm mighty glad—"

"I reckon I know what you thought, Ranse Martin. You, too, Myrtle." Grandpa looked at the window where the gun had gone off near his head. "Mighty lucky thing for me I took all the shot out of them shells," he said.

Ranse rapped out, "What do you mean? What the hell's going—"

"You're going," Grandpa said calmly. "That's what's going, Ranse. The both of you are going to Queen City this morning." His jaw was set in that stubborn Eller way that Ma always remarks on when I act up. "I may be old, but I'm not blind. Not yet I'm not."

"That's what you think, old Cap. There's more than one way to skin a cat." Ranse swung his shotgun up then, holding it at his waist, aiming it right at Grandpa's chest.

"No, Ranse!" Myrtle cried. "I back out now. That weren't in the bargain."

"You'll back out of nothing. Shut your damn mouth."

Grandpa didn't flinch. He just got a little smile on his face.

"No, Ranse," Myrtle said. "I mean it."

Grandpa said, "You've not got to worry, Myrtle. Ranse here's been talking about killin' something ever since he came on this place. But I've got him pegged. He wouldn't kill a tick unless he could set a trap and go off somewhere and hide while the dirty work was done."

"Is that so?" Ranse snarled, steadying his gun.

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That's when I stood up in the barn loft. I aimed the rifle at the corn thief, and I didn't tremble a bit. "Drop it, Ranse," I said. "Drop that gun now."

Ranse swiveled his head around and up, his eyes almost as wide as Myrtle's.

"You'd better do what he says," Grandpa advised. "I taught Joel how to handle that rifle, and he don't miss." He smiled up at me. "Come on down, son."

Ranse just let his shotgun fall out of his hands, his shoulders slumping.

I scrambled down the ladder. When I got there Grandpa was holding the shotgun, not pointing it at anybody. Myrtle was whimpering and Ranse looked like a suck-egg dog that had eaten an egg with red-devil lye in it. He even looked blue around the mouth. Wolf was sitting by the crib door looking at them with his one good eye, puzzled.

"I'll go call the Sheriff, Mister Jim," Myrtle said in a low voice.

"I hope this teaches you a lesson, Myrtle," Grandpa said.

From the look on her face it had. I almost felt sorry for her myself.

Ranse turned to walk towards the house with her. He didn't say a word more to us.

"Another thing," Grandpa called after them. "Joel and me are goin' fishing. When we get back, if that power saw has turned up, I won't mention it to Sheriff Slade."

I guess that's what's meant by tempering justice with mercy. Anyway, when we got back from the Cape Fear River, with a string of perch a yard long, there the power saw was on the back porch. And Myrtle and the corn thief had gone and turned themselves in to the law.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 436th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a spoof that might be described as an example of "the S. J. Perelman school" . . .

The author, Frank Snider, was 54 when he submitted his first story. "This may sound old," he wrote, "but remember that Grandma Moses didn't even get out of the starting blocks until she was past 80." Some thirty years ago Mr. Snider hoped to "become one of the titans of American literature," but after the return of his efforts "by all kinds of magazines including the big and semi-literate," he "decided to sell out, and rather than starve ingloriously, went into the business world. It is, as we know, short on immortality but long on money."

Will this flirtation with publication rekindle the literary gleam in Mr. Snider's eye? We shall see. . .

A PRIMER FOR MURDER

by FRANK SNIDER

Contentment to me is sitting in an easy chair by an open fire while outside the rain pounds angrily at the windows. And when my companion is as extraordinary a man as Van Wyck Tallow there is nothing more I can ask.

Ever since I first met Van Wyck—I believe it was shortly after the great motormen's strike of '23—the man has fascinated me. He has an analytical mind that has mastered the purely practical as well as the purely abstract. He is, on the one hand, a recognized authority on the history of the hot-water bottle, and yet has read much of the lost literature of Atlantis. However, it is his knowledge of printing that has brought him into contact with police work and started him on his incredible crime-solving career. Printing is both a hobby and a passion with him, and he often half humorously refers to himself as a "gentleman printer."

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Our friendship was one of the fine things in my life and I spent many pleasant evenings talking with him—rather, I should say, listening to him, for it was his eloquent discourses on every possible subject that dominated our conversations. In fact, I seldom got in a word. No matter. I always waited eagerly for those nights when Van Wyck would tell me the story of some great mystery he had solved.

I well recall the night he recounted his most baffling case. We had spent the early part of the evening looking through his collection of printers' aprons. I believe he has the most complete collection in the world, and he was in especially fine fettle because of a rare find he had made that very day. It was the apron of Pierre Ponpon, the distinguished printer who originated French post cards. There were two secret compartments in the apron and we found some cards that had been cleverly hidden inside.

The discovery of the apron, or perhaps the post cards, delighted Van Wyck, and I knew this would be a story night. I settled back comfortably in my chair, then moved it a little to avoid a small leak in the ceiling. At this inopportune moment there was a knock on the door.

"I suppose it is your dear old landlady, Mrs. Rump," I said.

"Probably," Van Wyck said, "and looking for the dear old room rent. I was about to tell you of my most remarkable case but this sordid interruption will undoubtedly destroy the mood."

I was caught. There was nothing for me to do but pay the woman and hurry back to my chair. Van Wyck had laid aside the one-string banjo on which he had been plucking that old folk classic, *The Love Lament of a Newfoundland Plumber.* He was now gazing dreamily into the fire. I grabbed him before he could fall in.

"I call it," he said, *"A Primer for Murder."* He paused dramatically and then began. "It started with the murder of Gordon Hose, a printer with a small shop who did some work in tracts, pamphlets, and handbills. Because of my interest in printing, Chief Inspector Rimski-Krosakow invited me to take a look at the case although he assured me it was routine. A short investigation had already established the pertinent facts.

"It seems that Gordon Hose had been trifling with one Stella Bonaparte, though having seen her, one can't possibly imagine why. At any rate, when her husband, Hannibal, found out about the affair he was outraged and it was definitely established that

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Hannibal had been seen entering Hose's place shortly before the murder.

"But the most damning point against him was the arrow that killed Hose. It came from a longbow of the type that Hannibal used for impaling impalas. Further corroboration was supplied by one Harry Primer, an old friend of Hose's, who had heard Hannibal make threats against the printer.

"As far as the police were concerned, everything was perfectly clear, but I could not agree with them. There were two clues in the case they had overlooked. I must admit they even puzzled me for a while."

"Good God," I said, "what could they have been?"

"Gordon Hose had been found slumped over his work. He had apparently been killed while setting type. But the type he had set up was a meaningless jumble. Now why should a printer work right up to the moment of his death setting lines of type that had no meaning? A puzzlement, eh?"

"It certainly is."

"But fortunately," Van Wyck said, "I noticed that all the lines were set in either 12 or 18 point type. And there was the whole solution. The murdered man had actually named his killer, probably while the killer was standing before him and telling him these were his last moments. Most ingenious. Do you follow me?"

I had to admit I did not.

"For once it isn't your stupidity that keeps you from seeing the beautiful design of this crime. It requires a knowledge of printing that the ordinary layman does not possess. Twelve and 18 point are the two kinds of type known as primer—12 point is called long primer, and 18 point great primer. And, of course, you recall I mentioned a Harry Primer. It was obvious, therefore, that it must have been Primer who killed Hose.

"Before that happened, however, Hose was able to leave the clue naming his murderer. Naturally he could not set up the name itself. Instead, probably claiming to be nervous, he continued working with what seemed to be a lot of meaningless type. Hose was a clever man.

"It was easy enough to find a motive for Primer. Everyone had a reason to kill Hose. It was incredible that he lived as long as he did. All that remained was to get a confession from Primer."

Having finished his story, Van Wyck relaxed in his chair. I was speechless with admiration and for a moment I sat in awed si-

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lence. Van Wyck reached for his needle and began crocheting another spittoon cover.

"Did Primer get the electric chair?" I asked.

"Yes, he did," Van Wyck said, "but that was unfortunate."

"Why?"

"Well, as it turned out he wasn't guilty after all."

"What! How about the meaningless lines and the primer type?"

"The lines weren't meaningless. They represented simplified spelling that just happened to be set in 12 and 18 point type."

"Well, then," I asked weakly, "who did kill Hose?"

"Never found out. I lost interest in the case."

I took the banjo from the umbrella stand and gave him the thrashing he so richly deserved.

"Q"

DARK PASSAGE, by Andrew York. Doubleday & Co., Inc., $5.95

Tommy Angel returns from a three year prison term with one thing on his mind: settling the score with beautiful Francine Drew, who had made him the fall guy in a £500,000 diamond heist. Angel knew he was innocent and had just about given up trying to prove it when he finds he is again Francine's patsy—this time for her own murder. He sets off on a one man quest for the proof of his innocence, and before it was all over quite a few people are changed in permanent ways.

THE HOLLAND SUGGESTIONS. A Novel of Suspense by John Dunning. Bobbs-Merrill, $7.95

Jim Ryan, middle-aged divorcé, receives several photographs of a mine opening and a trail leading to it. As he looks at them he begins doodling. Some numbers emerge—road routes. He's impelled to follow them. Can a man, once hypnotized, react to post-hypnotic suggestion fifteen years later? This is the eerie theme of this unusual suspense novel. Go along with Jim Ryan to that fabulous conquistadores' gold mine to danger, to near death, and to the solution of that stunning long-ago double-cross.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 437th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the kind of first story—about a semi-tough private eye—that we don't receive often enough . . .

The author, Leo Giroux, Jr., is forty, married, and has two teenage children. He is in what he refers to as "the nostalgic business"—selling old magazines and old comics. In the past he has worked as a radio announcer, radio script and commercial writer, newspaperman (sports), PR man, stagehand, molder (aeronautical gaskets), laboratory technician, and as an editor of psychiatric lectures. What a patchwork of vocations to draw on for plots!

His hobbies, in addition to collecting early story-magazines and bygone newspaper-comics, include airplane models, sports, circuses, carnivals, theater, and reading. He has one of the largest collections of old and rare magazines on the Eastern seaboard.

And yes: he joined the New England chapter of Mystery Writers of America, enrolled in its mystery-writing course—and here is the first happy result . . .

GRUDGE FIGHT

by LEO GIROUX, Jr.

Murray's Gym was so crowded you might think the fight game was popular again. It was a big place with bleachers against one wall for onlookers. Framed photographs of boxing greats were everywhere, some even autographed. Two not-so-good middleweights were sparring in the ring. I watched for a while, then went over to a lug who'd just finished at the punching bag. "Which one is Jimmy Lake?" He nodded at a guy jump-roping. I gave the bag a right jab and went over.

"Lake? My name's Nick Fisk."

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"Can't hear ya."

I held up my card. "Fisk," I yelled. "I'm a private detective."

He slowed down, not all at once, but gradually. "Okay," he finally growled, "let's go in the back."

Once there he slammed a locker door with his fist. "I'm tired of talking to cops!"

"Easy," I told him. "I understand. But you see, I'm representing Pete Foster's sister. She wants to get to the bottom of this."

He got mellower. "Yeah, Ellie. Nice kid. Went out with her a few times. Wanted to marry her."

"She told me that. Said you'd be willing to help. Said you were Pete's best friend."

"That's right. We were both kids in Chelsea." He rubbed his gloves together. "Got each other outta scrapes, things like that. You know, he had promise. Nam interrupted his career, but he still had a few years left."

"I saw him fight. He moved like Tony Zale."

"Yeah, come to think of it, he did. Yeah, maybe he could've made it. Even after the Army, I mean. He was changed when he got out. Kinda bitter and tired of things. But that never hurt him in the ring."

I took out my notebook, flipped a page. "Now, on the night of August nineteenth you were with him when he was shot."

Lake crossed the room and opened a door. The brisk autumn day rushed in. "It was here in the alley." He pointed, shivering from more than cold. "You see, we'd done some sparring together that afternoon. That's about all I'm good for now, and—well, we was going for a few beers afterwards. We got about five feet from this door when there was these bright flashes. It made a lot of noise, too, 'cause the alley echoed the shots. Pete yelled and that was it."

"See anyone?"

"Naw. I was too stunned. I heard footsteps running away, but nothing else." He kicked the door shut and came forward. "I know who did it, though. It was a rat named Lou Summers."

"That would be Ellie's husband. You told the police that, didn't you?"

"You already know a lot. Okay, sure I did. Why not? The creep's nothing but a hood. Ask anybody. And he hated Pete." Lake paused. "I can guess what you're thinking. You figure I fingered Lou because he married Ellie. Well, I'll admit it upset

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me plenty. I'm in love with her. But she got rid of him and that's enough revenge for me. Gimme a cigarette."

I did and we both lit up. I waited until he'd inhaled a few puffs. "Lou works for Ted Blaze," I said. "Is that what you're getting at?"

"Blaze! Now that's a laugh. Do you know what that fink's real name is? Finney. Just plain Finney. The bum changed it when he tried the gloves years ago. He couldn't swat a fly and keep it down for the count, so he graduated to the rackets. Sure I mean him. He tried to buy a piece of Pete a couple of months ago. Aw, ask Pete's manager."

"I already have. And you think Lou wasted Pete for Blaze?"

He nodded.

"Well, thanks, Lake." I turned and he followed me back into the gym. He looked at the room, said, "Hope you nail Lou good," and stopped.

"Something wrong?" He seemed confused about something. I looked over the crowd, trying to filter out any newcomers from the faces I'd seen earlier. It was difficult, since some groups were pretty dense. I recognized a pair of local bookies, a trio of pug-uglies I'd seen lose many a round years ago, a well-dressed dude with a big handlebar mustache, and a guy in the corner putting on gym shoes.

"Well?"

"I've gotta change," Lake said, and returned to the locker room.

Driving out of South Boston I thought about boxing. It had been one of the many things I'd tried before I became a detective. I mean, I'd had a manager, a trainer, and boxed on the circuit—the whole shmear. Nine fights with only one loss, which had been my last engagement, and a lulu, believe me. I'd fought a guy named Texas Bill Crane in Tampa, Florida, and in two rounds he settled my career in the game forever. He taught me that the long count wasn't any fun.

I picked up the car phone and reported to Ned Burger, my boss. Then I asked, "What's Ted Blaze's front these days?"

"Sports promoting. What else? He's trying to start a soccer league, the papers say."

"Where's his office?"

"It's got a name like East Coast Athletics or something. Go find the Yellow Pages. Am I supposed to do everything for you?"

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"Lake thinks Summers wasted Pete Foster because he wouldn't fight for Blaze. So far, Foster's manager agrees and Ellie Summers is getting to think the same way. That's a lot of agreement."

The connection was bad. Burger's gravelly voice was barely audible. But I was able to make out "Forget theories, Fisk. What we need is proof. And you claim to know your business!"

I smiled. With the salary Burger pays, I should be sensitive? "I can't hear you," I said. "Can't tell you from the static."

I hung up, double parked near South Station, and went into a phone booth. The Yellow Pages had what I wanted. East Coast Athletics was in Boston's infamous Combat Zone. I might've known.

First, though, I was hungry. So I drove the jalopy toward Back Bay, found my favorite Red Coach Grill, and ordered a two-inch steak with mushrooms. The gym was still in my head, I guess—I was eating like I was still in training.

I was on my third cup of coffee when Steve Henry sat down. Directly opposite me, too. I didn't say anything.

After three or four minutes he cleared his throat. "You're full of all kinds of friendliness and cheer today, aren't you?"

I told him, "Two things ruin my digestion, Steve. Reporters and cops. In that order."

"G'wan. Reporters are all right. Besides, I'm on sports, remember? Now, if I was on the crime beat I could understand your attitude. I could say to myself, 'Maybe the man's got a point'."

"The man has."

"I'll ignore that because I'm concerned. Some things bother a guy a lot and he has to get involved. Despite his better judgment. Despite the fact that he's treated like a plague carrier. Now, this very bothersome matter concerns a fine boxer who was wasted two weeks ago. I hate to see good talent go that way."

"Meaning Pete Foster."

"Meaning him. The grapevine, as usual, is saying various things. One of them is that Pete's sister hired you to find his killer. Well, I liked Pete. He was a good boy. But he had friends who speak with forked tongue."

"Meaning Jimmy Lake."

"Meaning him. Interested?"

"Depends. Go on."

"Well, at least buy me a cup of coffee."

I hailed the waitress and ordered.

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"It better be good," I said. "Coffee's gone up fifteen cents. Inflation everywhere."

Henry emptied the creamer jar into the cup, then dropped in three lumps of sugar. He now had coffee milk.

"Lake was doing pretty good before Pete came back from Nam." He lowered his voice. "Lake's a second-rate fighter but there's not much competition around these days, so he looked better than he really was. He was building a record of TKO wins that was impressive on paper, at least. If you ask me, nearly everyone he fought was a bum, but the locals loved him. They want a champ bad. But when Foster returned, Lake's popularity ended. In fact, the two of 'em were matched, if you recall, and after that Lake stuck strictly to sparring. But if you ask me, Lake carried a grudge."

"So what's new? You're stealing my time, Steve."

"Wait, I'm not finished. There's one more thing. That's if you give me the story first. I mean an exclusive, when you nab Lake."

"Only if Lake's the killer. Anyone else, you lose."

"Okay, Big Heart. Now listen: I interviewed Foster once. Lake was around when I did it. Foster got tired of talking about boxing after a while and he changed the subject to Vietnam. How glad he was the war was over. Then he started to tell me how the war had affected some of the Army guys in a bad way. How their values changed. Well, all of a sudden Lake nudged him and shook his head like maybe Pete should keep a closed lip. So Pete clammed up. My hunch is Pete did something bad in Nam and Lake had the goods on him."

"Blackmail? Lake? C'mon. Grudge I'll buy, but—"

"Why not blackmail? Maybe Foster got tired of paying out."

I got up. "Maybe a lot of things. It could be good info, though. Could be I'll call you."

Henry grinned. "You're a saint, Nicky boy. A saint."

"Sure," I said. "Remember me to God."

Lower Tremont Street was a nightmare of traffic. It took me twenty minutes to find a spot for my car. I put a parking ticket I always carry with me under the windshield wiper. It isn't that I'm cheap. I just didn't know how long I'd be busy with Blaze; and running back and forth to the meter was a real bummer.

The building was old, deteriorating, but maybe that was part of the front, too. It fitted snugly between a joke store and a tobacco

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shop and had the heading above the door arch: *Severs and West, Inc.* What that had once meant I didn't know. The building had been converted into offices and shops—a tailor, an employment service, two lawyers, and Blaze's phony Soccer League.

I went in, took the elevator, and got off at the second floor. I walked down a long dusty hall and found the only glass-faced door with print on its face in a run of six others. I knocked, a short rap, and turned the knob.

The inside was an improvement, but what they call kitsch. Freshly painted, the bright yellow walls and white borders made a man blink. So did the miniskirted doll with silver hair like curled tinsel behind the desk. She asked me what I wanted. I told her I played soccer and could I see Mr. Blaze.

After she left I looked at the big blowup on the wall of the game between the Glasgow Rangers and the Moscow Dyanmos in '72. Then I sat in a zebra-striped armchair, since the doll was taking her sweet time.

When she finally showed, she was blushing, and I figured Blaze for a pincher. She said I could go in, which I did. His office décor was the same as out front. Flipping my card at the little guy I said, "This is who I really am. Can we talk?"

He frowned, tugged at his orange tie with its fish-shaped pin. Then he stood up and held the side of his desk. "Well," he began, and a door to the left opened. "No."

"You didn't even look at the card. Well, since you can't read, I'm Nick Fisk and I'm a private detective," I replied, facing the tall dude who'd just come in. I was talking to Blaze from the corner of my mouth, which was kind of funny. But, you see, the dude had a bulge under his jacket.

I went on, "You better listen before you get rough. Pete Foster was wasted a couple of weeks ago and your name's come out of the hat. I know the cops have questioned you and maybe they figure you're okay. But the press don't. They liked Pete. He was a boxer with class. And you can't afford the bad publicity."

"He can afford anything." It was the dude. He moved but had to stop.

I waved my .38. "Including you, I bet. But I hope you come cheap. You're slow as molasses." I lit a butt with my free hand and sat down. "Besides," I added, "I see a lot of spaghetti Westerns. Now, I'm even faster at shooting, so let's all take it nice and easy."

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"Calm down, Lou," Blaze said. "You see, we have to be careful in this neighborhood, Fisk. You can never tell who might pop in."

"Ain't it the truth? Just the same, tell him to stop that stare of his. It makes me mad and I might lose my cool."

"Lou, look out the window," Blaze ordered.

"Now will you listen?"

"See, my hands are on the desk, Fisk. I'll press no more buttons. Besides, he's my only bodyguard. So go on."

"You tried to buy a piece of Foster before he got it."

"Correct."

"Okay, then, let's get to the point. Like this place—now, maybe this is only a front, but maybe too there's some potential in it. Either way I don't think you want trouble. You've got bigger things in mind than owning a boxer. So I can't quite fit you with the killing unless you're so temperamental you just couldn't take Foster's 'no.' Now that I've met you, I can't say you strike me that way."

Blaze nodded.

"But this stringbean of yours is something else."

The dude turned.

"Why not?" I told him. "You're gun-happy. You hated your brother-in-law and he hated you. Ellie ditched you and maybe—"

Lou Summers said, "I left Ellie, dummy. I was sick of her and Pete. Get your facts straight. And, sure, I hated him. I maybe even would've wasted him someday, but I didn't. And not because of Ellie or Mr. Blaze, either. The guy was the worst kind. A fink. A stoolie."

"Tell me about it."

"Not on your life, dummy."

"Tell him, Lou," Blaze ordered. "I don't want the heat on you—or me. Understand?"

Lou Summers shook his head. "I don't know why we gotta take this."

"Tell him."

"All right. But it ain't the way to handle a dummy like him." He bit his lip, then said, "Ellie told me this. When Pete got back from the Army he told her about something that had happened. It bothered him a lot—and it should've. The rotten stoolie fink. Seems he had a buddy in the outfit. They met in the service and they was extra-good pals 'cause this guy was a boxer, too. Pete said he was the only guy who ever worried him in a ring. You

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see, a bout was arranged between them at camp and Pete just barely beat him. But it didn't hurt their friendship none. Until they got to Vietnam."

"You remember this guy's name?"

"Yeah. Funny name for a pug. Talbot Ingram. Everybody called him Tally. Well, this Tally found a pretty racket for himself in Nam. He was working at a PX and he got to stealing some of the stuff and selling it at a high mark-up someplace else. Pete, the rat, got wind of it and reported it. He had to testify at the trial. Well, they put Tally in the brig and gave him a dishonorable. Pete used to say he felt bad about that, but why did he havta squeal in the first place? I don't feel sorry for him."

"Any idea what Tally looked like?"

"Uh-uh. That was all Ellie told me."

"Then I'll run along."

"I'm glad we could help you," Blaze said in his pseudodignified manner.

I decided to go back to Murray's. It was nearing five P.M., so the gym was almost empty. I looked around, couldn't find Jimmy Lake, and went into the locker room.

"Seen Lake anywhere?" I asked the big guy with the handlebar mustache who was emerging from the showers.

He rubbed the water free of his eyes with a towel and looked at me. "Don't know him." I pointed to the tattoo of boxing gloves in a V design on his arm. "That's what I call liking the sport."

He smiled. "I was drunk one night in L.A. and had it done. If I'd been sober it would've been a dancing girl."

I laughed, went out, and was crossing the gym to the door when Murray called me. "Message for you, Fisk. Jimmy Lake told me to tell you he's got something for you. Said he'll phone you at your office at nine thirty tomorrow morning."

"Why tomorrow?"

Murray puffed out his already fat cheeks. "Beats me. He left here 'bout twelve noon and came back at three stewed to the gills. Was in bad shape. Talked about poor Pete a lot, then wandered around here like a guy lost. Kept talking to the champs on the walls."

"The pictures?"

"Yeah, them. Afterwards he got even crazier. He says to me, 'The Max Schmeling-Joe Louis match was a grudge fight.' 'Every-

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body knows that,' I says. 'Well, let's not forget it,' he says. Nothing else."

I thanked him, left, reported again to Burger, then went home. I cleaned up, shaved, and went out again to meet Madge, my girl. I had a date with her and almost wished I didn't. Jimmy Lake was on my mind. Something had upset him and it bothered me like the devil. Madge noticed I was preoccupied and I told her I was working on a case that was gnawing at me. She understood and didn't press.

We had some Egg Foo Yung at a Chinese place in Harvard Square, then went to the Orson Welles Theater, since it was W. C. Fields week. I'd seen both flicks before—they were my favorites, but this time I wasn't laughing. After that we hit an espresso place and listened to a folk singer. By one A.M. I got Madge home.

"Listen," she said, "you've been a nervous wreck all evening and it's just intolerable. You better get busy on whatever's bothering you and clear it up. Then, when it's over—and only then—see me again."

It piqued me a little, but she was right. I kissed her good night and drove up the street to a phone booth. I had Jimmy Lake's address in my notebook. I found the page and called him. Nobody answered.

I raced out, jumped into the car, and U-turned her toward South Boston. The speedometer went up to 65, and I let it climb. I had to get where I had to get fast.

Lake's place was next to E Street and I found it with no trouble. Once in the entry I rushed to his flat upstairs. I went to his door and pounded. Nothing. I got down on my knees, peeked through the space between the door and the floor. No light, so I decided to break in.

I always carry the proper tools for a thing like that, and now I used one. It was easy, the lock was standard, and as I crossed the threshhold I snapped on the wall switch.

It was plain Lake wasn't rich. I mean, the furniture was second-hand or, if there is such a thing, third- or fourth-hand. And all of it was turned over, every piece of it, and gutted by some sharp knife. In a pile of chair stuffing and scattered newspapers was Lake himself, flat on his face. He'd been shot, two slugs in the back.

I bypassed the body and looked in the bedroom. The bed was

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minus the mattress, the blankets, everything. They were on the floor and the bureau drawers with them. I returned to the living room, stared at Jimmy again, and shook my head. I couldn't help thinking, if I'd only seen him earlier, maybe . . .

Well, there wasn't time for that. I left the building, drove to another booth, and gave the police an anonymous tip.

Murray's Gym was packed again the next morning. I went to the back room and found Jimmy's locker. It was unlocked, so I searched it. All I found were an old pair of gloves, some boxer trunks and gym shoes. Not even a pinup on the door.

Murray came in. "See Jimmy?"

"See the papers?"

"Not yet."

"He's dead."

He cursed a few gems. Then, "He was supposed to spar with Gus Hiller. I better go find another man."

We went into the gym and Murray went over to Handlebars, who was at the ropes looking fit for a match at the Garden.

I stood there, not knowing what to do for a minute, when the Schmeling-Louis bout rolled into my memory. Lake had mentioned it to Murray, so it might mean something. Louis had met Schmeling in a rematch. Schmeling was one of Hitler's "boy wonders" and Louis hadn't liked that. He'd creamed the German good. He'd . . . I went over to the walls.

A few minutes later I whispered in Murray's ear.

"Okay," he told me, "if you insist. But why?"

"Tell you later. Got any spare equipment?"

"Use Lake's. You're about the same size he was."

When I returned he said, "I ought to warn you—Hiller's good. He's fresh in from St. Louis, but I had a chance to watch him yesterday when he sparred with Lake. Be careful."

"Don't worry. I think I know his weak spot."

I climbed into the ring. It was crazy, I know, but I had to do it. I was dressed in Lake's trunks, wore his shoes, was using his gloves, and somehow that was right.

I looked at Hiller. He waved, smiled, came over and touched my glove. "Good to see you again. I didn't catch the name."

"Nick. Nick Fisk."

So we started. First we danced around a bit and finally he jabbed at me. Nothing hard, but he was a southpaw and I knew that

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meant trouble for me. Texas Bill Crane had been a lefty, too.

I hunched, then moved in closer and drove a quick one under his right elbow. His solar plexus took it like it was a love tap. There was no doubt about it—this bird was tough. And skilled, too. Because I no sooner pulled my glove back when he was lashing at my head. Two quick slammers I took from him. My headguard deflected the first blow but the followup was murder. My vision blurred and I hit the ropes. He drove forward and I ducked free. Then I clinched. While I held him close, I pulled my stunt. "Tally Ingram," I whispered.

Lord, how it worked! He let go, shock written all over his face. Then I swung.

"So Lake's remark about Schmeling and Louis gave you the clue," Steve Henry said, taking notes while I talked. We were in a Howard Johnson's having coffee.

"That's it. You see, Lake recognized Tally when he came into the gym the first time. Maybe not completely, since Tally had no handlebar mustache years ago. Pete Foster had probably told Lake about Tally again and again, since what had happened bothered Pete mucho. Anyway, Lake wanted to make sure, so when he sparred with him he had a chance to check him out real close. You see, he had this photograph of Tally and Pete Foster to go by. From their days in the Army. It's a good photo and Tally's features are pretty clear.

"Then Lake got drunk. That was a boo-boo. He came back later in the afternoon with the photo on him and hid it, just in case. I guess at first he wanted to sober up and see me—but the liquor started working on him and he told Tally. He said, 'I'm going to get you, Tally. For what you did to Pete. And I've got the evidence.' Just like that. Then he staggered out and Tally followed him home. He killed Lake and searched around for the photo. Then he went through Lake's locker the next morning. When he found nothing he thought Lake had been bluffing—about the photo, I mean.

"But Lake had unconsciously left a clue with Murray. He had mentioned the Schmeling-Louis fight. It so happens there's a picture of that fight on the wall of Murray's Gym. Lake had slipped his photo of Pete and Tally between the backing and the fight picture. It was a pretty symbolic act. After all, it was a grudge fight."

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I got up to leave.

"Wait," Henry said. "Why did Tally ever show up at the gym again?"

"Easy. After Tally had his revenge on Pete he should've left town right away. But he couldn't. The gym excited him. And he was so sure no one would ever suspect him, he came back. Remember, he loves boxing. It was in his blood. So that's it. The police found the murder weapon in his room later. And there's your story." I picked up the check and put it near Henry's cup. "And the coffee bill, too."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

KILLERS' LIB

by MARCIA HAMILTON

History proves that in matters of crime
The ladies will beat out the gents every time.

Men are so crude with their stabbing and gunning;
Women are wily and winning and cunning.

Males clumsily try to place blame on the butler;
Females are cannier, shrewder, and subtler.

And men, under pressure, are prone to confessing,
But Ms. Lizzie Borden's still keeping 'em guessing.

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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

Something different from Joyce Harrington whose range and versatility are impressive . . . a nostalgic and sharply evocative memoir from Chief of Police Trombetta's young manhood . . .

THE PRETTY LADY PASSES BY

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

"Why did I become a cop? That's a funny kind of question to be asking me now, one day before my retirement."

The gaunt gray man with the smudged circles under his eyes leaned back in his creaking city-issue chair and surveyed the young reporter who was positioning the microphone of his tape recorder with finicky care.

"If you'll turn that thing off, maybe I'll tell you. Not for publication though—at least, not until the day after tomorrow. Anyway, it's not the kind of story that sells newspapers. Oh, there's murder in it, all right. But it's old stuff and everybody involved is long gone. Except me. Care for a drink to be listening with?"

"Thanks, Chief Trombetta." The young man removed his machine from the battered oak desk and settled back with a paper cup half full of brandy which the Chief had produced from a locked side drawer. "I'm listening."

The Chief sipped from his own paper cup and let the brandy trickle slowly down his throat.

"How old are you, Marty?" Trombetta asked.

"Me? Twenty-five," Martin Kern replied.

"Well," said the Chief, "all this is gonna sound like ancient history to you. It all happened more than twenty years before you were born. But you asked for it, so I'm gonna give you the full details of how Frankie Trombetta, young hood-in-the-making, decided to go straight and joined the crookedest police force in the state."

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"You really cleaned up this town, sir," the young man objected. "Everybody knows that."

"Yeah. But that was later. This story goes back to a time when I was barely out of knickers. You know what knickers were, Marty? They were no-man's-land between short pants and longies. They were like knee-length corduroy bloomers and all the guys wore 'em and hated 'em.

"Anyway, this all happened a few months after I got my first pair of long pants. I was feeling pretty grown-up that summer, and started hanging around the corner candy store smoking two-for-a-penny Sweet Caporals with the big fellas. But I was still young enough to play Kick-the-Can or stick ball in the street, and to scrunch under the loading dock of the pickle works at midnight telling ghost stories. There was a gang of us, boys and girls both, that stuck together, and the storytelling sessions under the loading dock were beginning to turn into pinch-and-tickle marathons."

The Chief sipped again from his paper cup and his eyes glazed over with memory. He put his feet up on the desk and continued his story . . .

The old block hasn't changed much. Just gotten a little older and maybe a little dirtier. It's a different kind of dirt though, if you know what I mean. In those days the milkman had a horse, the iceman had a horse, even the banana wagon with bananas right off the boat, it had a horse. We could have started a fertilizer business with what those horses dropped in the streets every day. But we were too busy stealing bananas off the wagon to think about a legitimate enterprise.

Anyway, it was summer—sometime after school let out and before boredom set in and made us do crazy things. Like the night we broke into the fresh poultry market and tried to start a chicken war. We'd heard about cockfighting and thought we could make the chickens choose up sides and peck each other to death. But those chickens were too dumb for anything but soup. They just ran around in circles and squawked and tried to get back inside their crates. Things like that.

We spent most of our time on the street because those railroad flats in summer turned into sweatboxes. Sometimes we roamed around looking for trouble, seeing what we could pinch out of the five-and-dime or off the waterfront. But every afternoon at five o'clock we'd all be sitting on somebody's stoop, hot and dirty, wait

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ing for our mothers to stick their heads out of the window and yell, "Come and eat!"

And that was how come we saw the pretty lady. That's what we called her, The Pretty Lady. We never knew her name—that is, not until later. Every night, just before supper, she'd come walking down the street heading for First Avenue, and she was just about the most beautiful thing any of us had ever laid eyes on.

She wasn't very tall—I think I was taller than she was—but she made me feel like a clumsy little kid. Her skin was so white, like really good vanilla ice cream but warmed up, if you know what I mean, with a peachy kind of flush. Her hair was black and she wore it long when everybody else was getting theirs shingled. She had blue eyes, just a little bit slanted, with bluish shadows around them that made her look like she knew things nobody else knew. Her mouth was wide and smiling and she wore a lot of bright red lipstick.

But I think it was her nose that really got me. My family was pretty big in the nose department, and among the gang we had an assortment that ranged from pug to broken. The Pretty Lady's nose was the first nose I ever thought of as perfect. Not big or small, but just straight and perfect in the middle of her face. On top of it all, she smelled good.

The first few times she passed by we all got quiet and just looked. Even the girls stopped shrieking and giggling and took in every detail. Then we started watching for her to come swinging down the street with that perky little walk she had. And she always came by—every night about five o'clock. She noticed us, of course, because she would smile a little to herself as she passed by.

Finally one of the girls—I think it was Lucy Fabrizio—stood up one night when The Pretty Lady was passing and said, "Hi." She sat right down again on the bottom step as if she was embarrassed, but The Pretty Lady stopped and looked us over and said, "Hi, gang. How's it going?"

Well, we all muttered and shuffled our feet as best we could sitting on the stoop. But after that The Pretty Lady always had a few words for us when she passed by. And after that we each found an excuse to rush upstairs before five o'clock and come back down damp and combed and sometimes even with a clean shirt on. The girls began to smell of overdoses of Evening in Paris and Lucy stole some lipstick from the dime store.

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I'd been not saying much of anything, just tried to blend in with the gang, because my voice was unreliable and I couldn't think of anything smart to say. I didn't want The Pretty Lady to think I was a stupid young jerk. But one night she looked right at me when she stopped to say, "Looks like it might rain tonight."

I hunched my shoulders and stared somewhere past her left ear and said, "Yeah. Uh, where ya goin' every night?"

She laughed. Oh, it was something to hear her laugh. Guitars and mandolins. "I'm just a poor working girl," she said. "I'm going to work." And off she went down the street. I noticed that when she turned the corner onto First Avenue, the guys at the candy store whistled and made remarks. I couldn't hear what they said, but knowing them I could imagine. She called something back to them, waved her hand, turned the corner, and was gone.

About a week after that the weather turned really hot. My father would come home from work cranky, yell at my mother, eat his supper, and fall asleep in a chair near the open windows in the front room. I don't know how he could sleep in all that heat. I sure couldn't.

My mother would wash the dishes and go sit on the fire escape at the back of the building where she had a pile of pillows and old blankets and a view of the clotheslines all up and down the block. I bet my mother could tell you every article of clothing that belonged to every apartment on the block, how often it got washed and when anybody got anything new.

And me? Me and the gang spent those boiling nights under the loading dock of the pickle works across the street, too worn out to tell stories and too hot to play pinch-and-tickle. We'd each take turns stealing blocks of ice from our mothers' iceboxes, and we'd chip away at the ice until it was gone, rubbing it on our head and arms and eating it like popsicles.

One night during that heat wave we were all just lying there in the damp sour-pickle smell, not talking, hardly moving, just trying to stay cool till morning. It must have been after midnight because the street was pretty well deserted. The corner candy store was closed, but there must have been some action in the speakeasies around First Avenue because every once in a while a drunk would come staggering by. It was rather dark on the block because there weren't that many street lights to begin with, and half of those were busted.

So when the car came sliding down the street with its lights ou

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we were all too stupefied to do anything but watch. It was a big black car, high and square in the body, and I was sure it was a Packard. I was just beginning to take notice of cars and think about what kind I would buy when I got rich. It stopped a little way down from the pickle works and the back door opened with just the tiniest click of the handle. Then something fell or got pushed out of the back seat into the gutter. I didn't think anything of it at first—just somebody getting rid of some litter. We weren't very litter conscious in those days.

But then a head poked out of the car's front window. I couldn't tell who it was in the dark, but there was something familiar about the shape of the head. The voice put the clincher on it. I'd heard that voice before, not often but enough to recognize it.

It said, "You try holding out on me again, you'll get worse than that. Unnerstand?"

And the car slid away as quietly as it had come, around the corner into First Avenue.

We waited for a minute, longer than a minute, to see if the car was going to come back. We weren't so dumb even if we were just kids. When it didn't come back in the time it took to circle the block, we crawled out from under the loading dock and snuck over to see what, or who, was lying in the gutter.

Lucy Fabrizio started to scream and I had to put my hand over her mouth. She bit my hand, but at least she shut up. The rest of the gang, when they saw who it was and what had happened, they drifted away. So there was just Lucy and me looking down at The Pretty Lady. Only she wasn't so pretty any more.

She was curled up in a tight little knot and one arm was flung over her face. But I could see the blood seeping out from under. Lucy and I got her onto her feet, but it seemed like she couldn't straighten up. She was breathing funny, choking and gasping, and I was afraid she had a broken rib or something. I got her arm across my shoulder and Lucy had the other one. And then she looked at me. Out of one eye. The other one was closed.

"Oh," she said. "It's my hero." And she started laughing and crying at the same time, and almost fell down again.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go upstairs."

So we went. Up three flights of stairs and into the kitchen of my flat. We made her sit down on a kitchen chair and she just flopped her head on the table, still laughing and crying and making an awful noise. Her nose was bleeding and it made a

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small puddle on the green enamel tabletop, and she had a cut on her forehead that added to the mess. Lucy got a wet dishtowel and started mopping up, and I stuck my head out the window.

"Ma!" I called. "Ma, come inside. I need you."

My mother was dozing out there on the fire escape, but she woke up right away and came in.

"Jesumariaguiseppe!" she said, all in one breath, when she saw who was sitting in her kitchen. And she took over from Lucy who was doing her best but just getting blood all over everything.

Momma worked quickly and quietly. She'd done this sort of thing before. She told me to get towels and ice and iodine and Poppa's sweet vermouth. And by the time I finished getting everything, she had The Pretty Lady cleaned up and calmed down and lying on the daybed in the little room off the kitchen which was my room. It wasn't until then that she took a good look at who she'd been doctoring.

"Madonna mia!" she whispered. "It's Benno's whore!"

Then she looked at me as if she'd said something dirty that I shouldn't hear, but I guess she figured I was old enough to know what she was talking about. She shrugged and went to make a pot of tea.

I stood in the doorway and looked at the girl in my bed. Without lipstick and with her face washed clean, I could see she wasn't much older than me. In spite of the swollen eye and the puffy nose.

She said, "Thanks, kid. What's your name?"

"Frankie," I said.

"Well, thanks, Frankie. You know Benno?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Everybody knows Benno."

"Everybody," she agreed sadly. "I hope he won't, you know, d anything because you helped me out."

"Nah," I said. "He don't have to know."

Lucy came to the door and said, "Hey, Frankie, I better ge home. My mother'll kill me." She ducked her head a little an said to The Pretty Lady, "I hope you're okay now."

"I'm okay now. Thanks."

Lucy left, but I kept on standing in the doorway. I was jus about to ask The Pretty Lady what her name was, when Momm came bustling in with a teapot and two cups.

"You go to bed now, Frankie," she said. "Go sleep on the couc Don't wake Poppa."

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So I went into the front room where Poppa was snoring in the armchair by the window. I heard Momma close the door to my room, and I suppose she and The Pretty Lady were drinking tea and talking about woman things. I lay down on the couch thinking I would stay awake until Momma came out of the room and then go back and talk to The Pretty Lady myself. But the next thing I knew it was morning and my father had already left for work. Momma was washing clothes in the washtub and there was no sign of The Pretty Lady.

I knew better than to ask Momma anything about anything. She'd only tell me what she thought I ought to know, which in this case would be zero. So I spent the day hanging around the block waiting for five o'clock to roll around. When it did, The Pretty Lady didn't show.

For five days she didn't show and the heat wave didn't let up. The whole town was mashed flat under the weight of that heat and there was a kind of angry electric tension in the air. I kept away from the guys at the corner, even though they could probably tell me about The Pretty Lady, because they were just looking for somebody to pick on and I was just the right size.

Finally, one afternoon, the sky turned black and there was thunder rumbling in from the swamps that stretched for miles behind the city. We waited for the rain with our tongues hanging out and when it came, the first fat juicy drops, we ran around in the street shrieking at the lightning and soaking up the cool wetness, feeling alive for the first time in a week.

It didn't last long, but while it lasted the gutters ran like rivers and when it was over the street was cool and clean and we were wet and happy. We all went and sat on my stoop, and that was the first time I took a really good look at Lucy Fabrizio. I mean, outside of the fact that we grew up on the same block and went to the same school and she was part of the gang.

Her dress was wet and it stuck to her body in a way that gave me a lot to think about, and her hair curled up in tight black ringlets that dripped water down her face and neck and into the top of her dress. I was watching one of those drops trickle past Lucy's collarbone when the gang suddenly stopped chattering and took a collective deep breath.

The Pretty Lady was coming down the street. She walked in that same perky way she had, but there was something missing. I couldn't tell if she looked at us when she passed because she was

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wearing dark glasses. Maybe her mouth wasn't quite as ready to smile as it used to be, or maybe it was that she didn't say a word to us as she passed by. One thing I noticed for sure. Her nose wasn't perfect in the middle of her face any more. There was a kind of a small crooked bump which you would only notice in profile. When she got to the corner the guys outside the candy store whistled and shouted, but she just swung around the corner without taking any notice of them.

After that I tried not to be hanging around the block at five o'clock. Lucy and I sort of drifted away from the gang and started doing things by ourselves. We used to go sit in the park and talk about what we wanted to do after we finished school, or whether it was even worthwhile to stick it out. I didn't want to end up being a streetcar conductor like my old man. And my big brother, Sal, who didn't live at home any more, was rolling in money which it wasn't too healthy to inquire where he got it, but it wasn't from any nickel-and-dime job. So I had ideas.

Lucy had ideas, too. She went to the nickelodeon every chance she got and her heroine was Mary Miles Minter. She wanted to quit school and go out to Hollywood and become a Baby Wampus Star.

So if it hadn't been for wanting to keep up with Babe Ruth's record and wondering if he was gonna be league leader that year, I never would have known what happened to The Pretty Lady. I never read the paper except for the baseball scores. So one day in August there I was at the candy store about to pick up a *Journal* and flip through to the sports page, when I saw her picture on the front page.

It was a posed picture. The Pretty Lady was dressed in some kind of spangled costume with lots of leg showing, and underneath the picture the black print said: HIT-AND-RUN VICTIM.

There was a short paragraph next to the picture. All it said was that the body of Magdalena Durando, otherwise known as Lena DuRand, an exotic dancer, had been found in an alley off River Street, obviously the victim of a hit-and-run driver.

What was obvious to me was that Benno had made good on his threat. I knew those alleys down around River Street and there was no way for a hit-and-run to happen in any of them. They were narrow and dark and they all dead-ended out on the piers. A car could get through all right, but slowly and carefully. And what would The Pretty Lady be doing in one of those alleys in the

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first place? I had visions of the big black Packard dumping its bundle again, only this time The Pretty Lady was beyond help.

The paper went on to sound off virtuously about how automobile traffic was beginning to clog the streets of our fair city, and how reckless drivers endangered the lives of all of us.

I threw my two cents down on the counter and ran out of the candy store all the way to the police station, clutching the newspaper and not really thinking about what I was doing. Only I had to do something. When I got to the station—this very building, in fact—I was out of breath and shaking. And it wasn't just from running. When I thought about it later, I realized that was the first time in my life I was really angry, not just mad soreheaded kid stuff, but deep-down angry.

I ran into the station house and right up to the desk. I slammed that newspaper down in front of the sergeant and shouted, "Benno did it!"

The sergeant just went on writing something on a piece of paper as if I didn't exist. I inhaled a deep breath, leaned over the desk, and said loud and clear, "Benno Lucchese killed her. First he beat her up and dumped her in the street. I heard him say he'd do worse than that if she held out on him again. He killed her! I know he killed her!"

The sergeant finished what he was writing, blotted it carefully, read it over once, and put it in a wooden tray. Then he looked at me and said, "So?"

I guess it was that "So?" that really got to me. I understood right then that Lena DuRand didn't count, and I didn't count, and even the desk sergeant didn't count. Nobody and nothing counted except the system. I couldn't have put it into words then, but it was a chilly kind of feeling to run into in your first pair of long pants.

I said, "You ain't gonna do nothing about it." It wasn't even a question.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "I'll do something about it." He got up and hitched up his belt with the heavy gun hanging from it. "Come with me."

I followed him up some stairs and down long halls and around corners, never taking my eyes off the gun on his hip. We came to a door and he stopped. I guessed where we were going even before I read the sign on the door. There was a cold chemical smell in the hall.

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He said, "You don't ever forget what you see in here," and he opened the door.

It was a small room. A slab in the middle, a row of glass-fronted cabinets on one side, tile floor and bright lights. And even in August it was cold. The sergeant walked across the room to a bank of what looked like file cabinets set into the wall. I followed him. I knew what was coming, and I halfway wanted to run away, but the other half wanted to stay and see what I already knew.

Without a word the sergeant pulled open a drawer and pulled the sheet off of what was inside. Lena DuRand, The Pretty Lady, was naked. There wasn't a mark on her body. Her eyes were closed and she still wore her bright red lipstick. If it weren't for the black hole on one side of her forehead, she could have been sleeping.

I said, "She wasn't hit by no car."

"Internal injuries," he answered.

"Oh, yeah? What's that on her head?"

"Beats me," he said. "Must be some kinda birthmark. You seen enough?"

I looked at him, and he was looking back at me with a sad smile on his face. "Pretty, ain't she?" he said. "Too bad she was dumb. You look like a smart kid."

"I do okay," I said.

He closed the drawer. "Yeah. Well, you keep on doing okay. And be careful crossing streets. Traffic's gettin' to be a pistol around here."

Chief Trombetta drained his paper cup and glanced across his desk at the young reporter.

"That's it," he said. "End of story. Nothing in it for you. Just a poor dumb broad who got mixed up with the wrong guy."

"What happened to Benno Lucchese? Did you get him after you joined the force?"

"You mean did I carry the memory of Lena DuRand around for years and track down her killer to the ends of the earth? Nothing so romantic. Benno did all right for himself all through Prohibition. A lot of small-time hoods did all right then. But when Repeal came along, Benno was out of a job in a manner of speaking. He tried to muscle in on the gambling rackets, but he must have hurt somebody's feelings because he wound up out in the swamps with a piano wire around his neck. I was out in Colorado at the

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time, working with the C.C.C., and only heard about it later."

"Well, you never married, Chief," Marty persisted. "Was that because of Lena DuRand? Were you in love with her?"

"Marty, stop trying to build something out of nothing. I did get married. Right after I got back from Colorado. But Lucy couldn't take being the wife of a rookie policeman. So she took her silver tap shoes and went to California. I never heard from her again. If she's still alive, I guess I'm still married."

"But you did become a cop because of The Pretty Lady, right?"

"I guess you could say that. If she hadn't passed by our block every night at five o'clock, I never would have seen her or got that guided tour of the morgue at an impressionable age."

The Chief leaned forward across his desk. "But, Marty, you know what stuck in my mind all those years while I was finishing school and while I was in the Civilian Conservation Corps? It was that desk sergeant and the look on his face when he showed me the body of Lena DuRand. He was as crooked as the rest of them. But he was doing what he had to do and hating every minute of it. He really saved my life, you know. If Benno had got wind of what I said that day in the police station, I would have ended up another hit-and-run case. I guess I felt I owed him."

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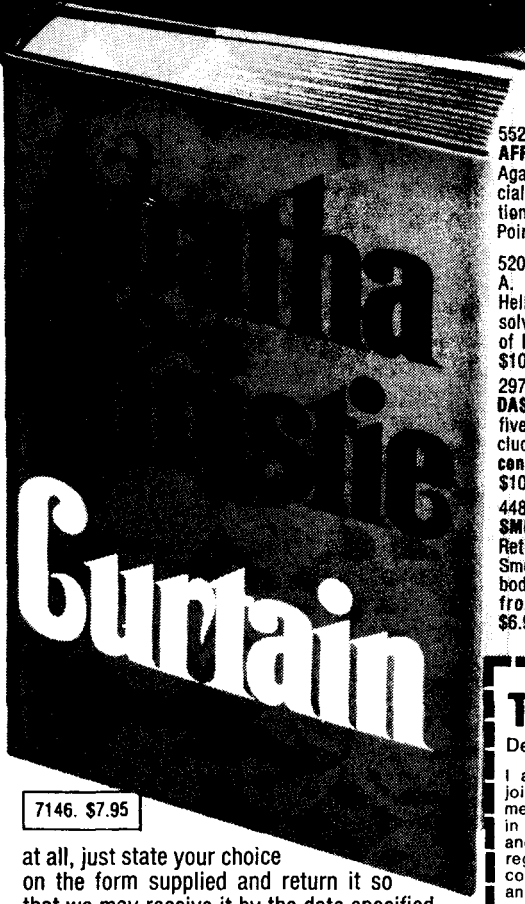

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Tai Shan had the requisite training for his present position of authority. In the past he had been a gambler, smuggler, mercenary, and river pirate. Now he was a mandarin, wealthy in land and lucre, but even wealthier in wives and concubines—for Tai Shan collected women from nearly every country in Southeast Asia . . .

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THE TIGER OF THE MEKONG

by MacLEAN O'SPELIN

The fifth wife of Tai Shan, the one he had long ago brought to Laos from far in the south, bowed her head timorously. "I pray you, respected husband, tonight pass the *divan de fumée* by."

With affection that he kept carefully hidden, Tai Shan looked down at the shining black hair arranged in the style of Fifth Wife's native Cochinchina. So feminine, this small woman whose face bore no line or wrinkle, whose slim body still wore the cai ao and cai quan with grace and allure.

Conscious grace and allure, of course. Just as the timorous curve of head and neck was deliberate. "Fifth Wife, my nights as well as my days are mine to order as I choose. It is impertinent of you to presume otherwise."

She raised her head, concern darkening her great eyes. "The pipe has brought ruin to many another mandarin, venerated Tai Shan."

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Despite himself, he drew his tall body even taller to settle his long robe in more elegantly austere lines. But, also unconsciously, a lean forefinger touched the gray mustache where its scholarly droop concealed the ragged scar that ran from lower lip to jawline. "Such men were soft," he said, his tone final. "Summon Ah Fong."

She hesitated, then crossed the polished teak veranda of the vast house, built Lao-style on heavy stilts, and, leaning over the rail, called to a servant hovering below.

Tai Shan smiled with inward irony; though not born a mandarin, he assuredly had become one. For, along with the wealth and the property amassed in his 70 years, had come almost inexorably a mandarin's share of wives and concubines, children and grandchildren, servants and hangers-on.

To oversee such a complex clutter of interrelated humanity, a mandarin, whether born or self-made, must have a grand vizier, a high chamberlain—or a loyal, adroit chatelaine. And in the 20 years Fifth Wife had been in his household, the small tough-fibered woman had grown into that role.

An indispensable woman. But utterly wrong about the danger to him of the pipe.

She returned. "Honored husband, during your midday repose, Kham Xai was here. I refused to awaken you."

His eyes, strangely light in an otherwise Chinese face, glittered like yellow citrine. "The domain of Tai Shan, here beside the mighty Mekong, must be as gall to such a one as Colonel Kham Xai."

"Colonel Weasel Face came alone, came secretly to thrust his rat's nose where it does not belong."

"A strange mixture, your countryman."

"No countryman of mine!" Her eyes blazed. "An animal from the north!"

But Tai Shan was descending the stairway, at the foot of which the burly Yunnanese, Ah Fong, stood holding the door of the gleaming Mercedes. "To the boun, Fong-ah."

At the boun he would see and perhaps deal with Kham Xai of the Pathet Lao Police. Better, he would also see Mademoiselle Brown.

Being 70 might have slowed down his appetites but it had not killed his appreciation. For him, to be a *collectionneur des femmes* was preferable to being a collector of jade or porcelain or classic

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calligraphy with which, in other days, born mandarins amused themselves. To be sure, his fine house, standing nobly amid his twenty hectares of prime land, held man-made works of art. But it also held women from nearly every country in Southeast Asia. Some he'd married. Some he'd acquired by other means. All were human works of art.

The Mercedes lurched as Ah Fong swerved sharply to avoid a buffalo cart. The heavy car slewed violently sideways on the muddy, rutted road. "Fong-ah, have care! Break these bones and your father's ghost and his father's will curse you through eternity."

Big hands skillfully straightening the car, Ah Fong spilled words over his shoulder. "Master, both died willingly in your service. And so would your humble Fong-ah, Master."

A courteous exaggeration. No man died willingly. But Ah Fong was a fine driver and Tai Shan eased back into the soft seat and began to think almost wistfully of the fierce days on the Mekong when Ah Fong's grandfather had been young and full of fight. And he, Tai Shan, had been full of ambitious visions of wealth wrested from an ungiving world.

Then, through his reverie, he heard the drums from the pagoda where tonight's boun was being celebrated. Vientiane was a city of pagodas and each had its boun, its festival, and all were enthusiastically attended. And now there were colored streamers and ringing bells and the clash of cymbals and, everywhere, cheerful smiling faces—except those of the Pathet Lao Police glum in baggy trousers, sneakers, and Chinese AK-47 machine pistols, on joint patrol with smartly uniformed Royalist Police.

When Ah Fong stopped the gleaming car at the courtyard of the many-spired pagoda, two young bonzes in orange robes escorted Tai Shan to the wrinkled, shaven-headed Chief Bonze sitting crosslegged under a crimson ceremonial canopy.

Tai Shan bowed, exchanged a few words in Lao with the old priest, and dropped several taels of gold into the convenient alms bowl. Amid appreciative murmurs from the crowd he bowed again and turned away.

An ostentatious gift, admittedly. But ostentation was expected of him, the legendary Tai Shan of the Mekong.

Musicians began to stroke their lutes and to coax their strangely seductive notes from the silver reeds of their khens. Slowly couples of all ages formed lines and began to dance the languid lam-vong.

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Tai Shan made his stately way to the sidelines where a chair was immediately produced by a deferential Royalist member of the Joint Council that, more or less, governed Laos. Kings and Communists, he thought wryly, there was an ironic combination. But, while neighboring countries suffered in anguish, the Council managed to preserve a peaceful, if uneasy, status quo.

Status quo. The two words summed up his own politics. Status quo—for the domain of Tai Shan.

The lines of couples dancing the lam-vong had grown longer and he picked out Mademoiselle Brown and settled back to watch. Trim and not too tall, she kept getting ahead of the music's slow rhythm, which amused him. Nervous energy was the antithesis of the drowsy lam-vong of Laos.

Indeed, he himself had needed years of retirement before he could slow down to anything approaching the Lao pace. And that despite blood in his veins from a mother who had been a Lao-French *métisse*. Of course, the vigorous blood from his Hakka father had countered the Lao tranquillity—and who knew what spice the French blood had added?

Mademoiselle Brown saw him and catching the hand of her partner, a handsome young Lao in Royalist Police uniform, she quickly moved his way. "Greetings, honored Tai Shan," she said in American-accented French. "A lovely evening, is it not?"

As a mandarin, Tai Shan did not rise for women. But a smile warmed his austere face as he looked at her. "Not half so lovely as you."

It was untrue. She was not lovely. Or conventionally pretty. But she had youth and vitality and a controlled intensity that often kindled a blaze in her blue gaze. And she had a slim, neatly proportioned figure, not overblown like that of so many of her race. Otherwise, Tai Shan would not have looked at her twice.

"You know Lieutenant Vang of the Police, of course," she went on, and Vang, in the Lao way, bowed low and smiled but said nothing.

"*Bon soir*, Mademoiselle Brown . . . Tai Shan . . . Vang." It was Colonel Kham Xai and Tai Shan examined him, looking for traces of weasel and rat. There were none—Fifth Wife had exaggerated. But the skin tone was lighter and the bone structure more angular than in most Lao faces. And naturally so. As Tai Shan had long ago learned, the man was Hanoi born, a DRV commissar illegally in Pathet Lao uniform.

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"Find chairs, Vang." The Colonel's French rang metallically.

Tai Shan kept his own tone mild. "My wife regrets her abruptness this afternoon, *mon colonel,* and hopes you will honor us with another visit soon."

"I shall. A feudal establishment is always a fine study in ancient history."

Tai Shan's eyes glinted like many-faceted topazes, but his voice was level. "We will hide nothing—for we have nothing to hide."

"Yes, I have heard the tale that your years as the fierce and hungry Tiger of the Mekong are behind you." Kham Xai smiled mockingly. "Now you are a man of peace, playing at being a mandarin." He leaned close to Tai Shan. "River pirates are sometimes useful. Mandarins never."

Lieutenant Vang's quiet voice broke in. "The Honorable Tai Shan is a Lao citizen. Your words, Colonel, are insulting."

Kham Xai eyed him with contempt. "Mandarins and kings and Royalist lieutenants are vestiges—vestiges doomed to wither and rot."

Mademoiselle Brown, seated now and leaning forward attentively, said, "Do you hope to hurry the rotting process, Colonel?"

Before the Colonel could respond, Vang cut in again. "Beware Kham Xai. Your uniform deceives no one. Perhaps it will be you who will wither and rot."

"Well spoken," said Tai Shan, pleased with the vigor of the young Lao's words. Within the Kingdom of Laos was the mandarinate of Tai Shan. And, like pit vipers, commissars can be lethal to mandarins as well as to kings.

A flush burned in Kham Xai's bony face and his mouth worked but no words came from his thin lips. Abruptly he swung away and strode off.

"Damn," said Mademoiselle Brown. "Just when things were livening up."

"Disappointing for you," said Tai Shan drily. She was, he knew, an intelligence operative who reported to some mysterious headquarters in the city of Washington. In fact, she had once tried energetically to recruit him to spy for her.

With amused courtesy he had declined. As a practical matter of survival he, himself, used spies. But, although he had been many things—gambler, smuggler, mercenary, river pirate and, now, mandarin—he had never been a spy. And even for a young woman whose spirit he admired, he would never be.

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Disappointment flickered, but she had said, "In a way I'm glad. But you will go on advising me? I so want to succeed on this assignment."

He had agreed. He approved of this practical and attractive and tough-fibered woman. A few years ago he would have tried persuasion or purchase or abduction to add her to his personal collection. Now it seemed best to view and enjoy her on display, so to speak, in a gallery that was not his responsibility.

The lam-vong music stopped. Immediately the drums filled the void and Tai Shan suggested that she and Lieutenant Vang take tea with him somewhere more quiet.

She thought the idea charming, she said, but Vang, his handsome face still animated from the clash with Kham Xai, explained that he was on patrol and, regrettably, must resume his duties . . .

Perched on tall stilts, the Bo Pen Nyan Teahouse was close to the Mekong. It was too dark to see the river itself, but bobbing yellow lights on fishing pirogues told them that, as always, it was there. Inside, Mademoiselle Brown suggested a table in an alcove where they could watch the lights, adding that if she might she would have cognac and soda although she knew that he took nothing stronger than tea.

A thrust worthy of one of his wives, thought Tai Shan with amusement. And true, insofar as his not caring for the taste of alcohol.

The proprietor, round and brown and anxious, hovered over his important guests until they were served. Then Tai Shan dismissed him with instructions to give Ah Fong one, and only one, shoum-shoum. Rice beer, in quantity, did not mix with driving the rudimentary roads of Laos.

Bowing low, the proprietor withdrew, backing away as if from an audience with royalty. "All Vientiane respects you, Tai Shan," said Mademoiselle Brown, her blue eyes large above her glass.

"It is your gracious person he honors."

"Nonsense." Her sharp tone raised his gray eyebrows. Quickly she said, "Forgive me. You never talk nonsense. But I wish to talk of something important. May I?"

He nodded gravely, noticing that under the surface she was tense with excitement. There was a plot, she began—or at least she had a report of a plot. And she believed it. And she had immediately cabled it to her headquarters. A plot to assassinate Colonel Kham Xai!

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"One can always hear rumors of plots," murmured Tai Shan.

"My source is the man who will do the killing!" The triumphant note in her voice pleased Tai Shan. Here was a woman who enjoyed the work she did.

He smiled indulgently. "One can always hear foolish boasting."

"I know, most respected Tai Shan. But my source is Vang!"

"Impossible!" For once, Tai Shan's composure was shaken.

"No, Tai Shan, not impossible."

"Mademoiselle, I know Vang. In a rage he would fight, perhaps kill. But never could he *plan* an assassination."

"But he has!" Finding himself under Colonel Kham Xai's command, she explained, Vang had grown to detest the foreign commissar who so obviously considered the Lao an inferior race. And in time Vang had grown convinced that Kham Xai's true mission was the disruption of the Joint Council. To create chaos. So that the DRV could move into the vacuum. And once again Laos would be dominated by foreigners. "Like most Lao, Vang is a peaceful man. But he loves his country, Tai Shan. And he serves it."

Reflectively Tai Shan stroked his jade sash buckle, an intricately carved Fifteenth Century piece he'd removed from a Chinese trading junk many years before. Handling ancient jade stimulates thought, the great philosopher K'ung Fu-tze had written.

"Your information that Kham Xai is from Hanoi is accurate, Mademoiselle. But why has Vang been so indiscreet as to revea the plot to you?"

Her gaze was level. "He is very much attracted to me."

"I see." He nodded approvingly. "One uses the weapons one has."

Her laugh, charmingly, was unabashed. "I'd never thought o my body as a weapon—but, yes, Tai Shan, one does." She sobered "Kham Xai is a very important man. So I gambled. I cabled th report immediately. In my profession the report of an assassina tion after the fact is worthless. Before the fact it is a majo achievement."

"A bright jewel for your professional record."

"Exactly."

"Mademoiselle Brown, in my view Vang was boasting to a val ued female friend of a deed he only dreams of." Rising, he looke down at her gravely. "For you, a kindred spirit, I shall discove whether a plot actually exists. Perhaps others more iron-minde

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than the good Vang are involved. But now I shall exercise a mandarin's prerogative and end this delightful interlude."

"You are a good friend." Then concern darkened her eyes. "Please take care. And . . . give up the *divan de fumée*." Concern gave way to a dancing blue imp. "That was brash. But I am a brash American, after all. And you, dear Tiger of the Mekong, are the only real pirate I've ever known."

He smiled drily. "Retired pirate, my dear Mademoiselle Brown."

Tai Shan had known La Mère Pavotte, proprietress of the *divan le fumée*, for 40 years. A *métisse* of a racial mixture unknown even to her, she had the singleness of purpose he admired. Never a beauty, always a shrewd businesswoman, she had battled her way to a prosperity evident in the opulent décor of her opium-smoking *divan*.

She greeted him as equal addressing equal. As such, mandarins did not impress her. What impressed this woman with the dark face of a withered poppy was, first, a man's ability to pay her stiff prices and, second, his ability to exchange useful favors.

"What news this night, sister Pavotte?"

"The usual. Squabbling in the Joint Council. No decisions, just quabbling." She escorted him to a richly appointed private cubicle. Somewhat stiffly, he stretched out on the velvet floor mat that out of deference to his years was slightly padded. His favorite attendant, a wrinkled wiry Cantonese, entered and began his preparations.

The old man was expert, never spoke, and, according to La Mère Pavotte, understood no French. Tai Shan spoke in that language. "No rumors of an assassination plot, Pavotte? Against the foreigner from across our eastern border?"

"None I have heard, brother Tai Shan." Her black eyes were thoughtful. "Assassinating him would be a disastrous error."

"Because it would provide Hanoi an excuse for open aggression against Laos—thus writing the end for you and me, eh, my sister?"

She drew up a carved stool and sat. In her own way La Mère Pavotte was a good companion. She said, "With the Royalists we can always live. And, for Communists, the Pathet Lao are satisfactorily congenial." She made a rude gesture. "But the Communists from the east!"

Tai Shan's head rested on a tile neck support close to the now

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burning opium lamp, which was a beautiful antique. Near it the old Cantonese lay propped on his elbows on the bare floor, body extended the opposite way from Tai Shan's. He had laid out the cloissonné vessel of dark shandu paste, the slender ebony-handled heating skewers, and Tai Shan's personal pipes. Patiently he awaited Tai Shan's signal to begin.

"As ever, Pavotte, your reasoning is correct. When the joint patrol arrives, my sister, have them entertained with food and drink. And by ivory-skinned Shanghai girls, if you think necessary. Send the senior Royalist officer to me."

Rising, she nodded to indicate that whatever he and the police officer discussed would be their affair alone. Then, as Tai Shan signaled the attendant to prepare the first pipe, she bowed formally and left.

Smoking shandu can be a one-man operation, but a two-man operation is far better. Opium is not tobacco and an opium pipe is not a tobacco pipe. It takes perhaps 15 minutes to smoke a pipe of tobacco; 15 seconds will do for a pipe of shandu.

Positioning himself carefully, the attendant handed Tai Shan a pipe that was a work of art. Then he dipped out a dark globule from the shandu pot with a needlelike skewer and held it over the lamp. Delicately he spun the skewer in his sinewy fingers as the opium began to glow.

When it burned evenly, like a dark red pearl, he glanced at Tai Shan to see if he were ready. Then, swiftly, he transferred the glowing red pearl to the small hole in the flat bowl of the pipe.

With the skill of 50 years of practice Tai Shan drew in a long even breath, timed to consume the red pearl completely while allowing no wisp of smoke to escape anywhere but deep into his lungs.

The old Cantonese took the pipe from him and laid it with the others on an oblong of silk. Tai Shan relaxed against the neck support. He felt nothing, but he seldom did before the third or fourth pipe—and he never permitted himself more than four.

Like La Mère Pavotte, he abhorred addiction and addicts. In a *divan de grande luxe* such as hers, addicts were disruptive. Often they became criminals, and criminals draw unwelcome attention from the police. The amiably routine attention Pavotte's quiet *divan* presently drew was welcome protection, and she meant to keep it that way.

To Tai Shan's mind the pure Meo-grown shandu she dispensed

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was to the virulent alkaloids of refined opium as shoum-shoum was to fiery straight-grain alcohol. The one a friendly relaxant, the other a deadly poison.

Not that one couldn't smoke too much shandu or drink too much rice beer. Easily done—but only by fools.

When Lieutenant Vang entered, Tai Shan was just finishing his third pipe. He sent the attendant away. Not that he objected to smoking his fourth pipe in front of the young Lao—smoking can be social or private as the smoker prefers. But he had begun to feel the effects and when he reached his limit of four the world would be more rose-tinted, more misty, more dreamlike than was appropriate for what he had in mind.

It was comfortable on the velvet mat. But even a ruthless pirate turned benign, all-wise mandarin loses force when he is supine at another's feet. So, rising, he waved Vang to a stool but remained standing himself.

"Vang, these ears have heard whispers that you plan a foolish act."

Startled, the young officer stammered that he could not imagine what the most revered Tai Shan meant. But the handsome boyish policeman was no match for the tall lean man in the elegant robe. Yes, Vang finally blurted, he and three other young officers intended to rid Laos of the man from Hanoi. Yes, they had a plan, not just a dream.

Tai Shan locked their eyes, his own gleaming darkly yellow in the murky light. "It is a plan for fools. Abandon it."

Anger flared. "I am no fool, Tai Shan."

"Think. Your act would be a golden boon for your enemies. A disaster for your cause. Think!"

Vang's gaze faltered. He stared at his hands.

"You are no assassin. You are a Lao. A Lao Royalist. A Royalist officer sworn to preserve Laos, not destroy it."

Shaking his head as if to clear it, Vang avoided Tai Shan's grim and glittering gaze. A long moment passed. Then the younger man rose slowly, flexing his shoulders as if shrugging off a burden. "You are right, honored Tai Shan. Where you are wise, I was foolish."

"What, then, of the other three?"

Smiling now, Vang moved to the door. "Fear not, o wise Tai Shan. They will laugh with joy to be released from such a terrible duty."

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When Vang had gone, Tai Shan grasped the silken bell pull on the wall and summoned the attendant. He had been confident he could dominate the young officer but all the same it was agreeable to have prevailed. Perhaps this night he had earned a fifth pipe—even a sixth.

The old Cantonese padded in on his soft slippers, and much less stiffly than before Tai Shan arranged himself on the velvet mat, smiling to himself. No, not tonight. The rule of four was a sound rule. And it had been unbroken for 50 years. No, not tonight . . .

When Pavotte saw him to the door, he told her that he had learned from Vang that the rumors of an assassination were completely false. She nodded with satisfaction. "Fine news to hear. Good night, brother, sleep deeply."

And he would. His mind was clear, yet he was happy he need make no further demands on it. All he need do was sink into his car's soft seat and be driven home, home to his castle, to his realm. "Fong-ah, as you go in fear of your grandfather's ghost, drive well. Let nothing disturb my peaceful thoughts."

A soft rain was falling now and the film of droplets on the windows closed him in, made him drowsy. Yes, it had been a good night's work—even Vang would benefit. For he and his friends would have bungled the assassination. And been summarily shot for their plans. So he, the retired Tiger of the Mekong, had done well for all concerned.

Or almost all. Now, instead of a bright jewel, there would be a black stain on Mademoiselle Brown's record. Most unfortunate. But not the ultimate disaster. Merely a temporary setback to a promising career.

Still, he certainly must tender her an apology. A handsome apology. He owed his attractive young friend at least that much. But there would be time for that later . . . He stifled a yawn.

It had been a long evening. He yawned again. Ah, yes, sister Pavotte, sleep would be deep tonight.

The next morning the rain had stopped. But beyond the flowering frangipani outside his window he could see gray sky. A cool day, ideal for a leisurely tour of his domain.

He breakfasted on the veranda where he could look across the Mekong to Thailand on the far shore. Most of the many motorized sampans and pirogues on the river were his. Ferrying goods and people between the two nations was a profitable business. And,

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for him these days, legitimate. A mandarin does not indulge in smuggling—particularly when the need exists no longer.

He sent for Sixth Wife. And, brown and still shapely and with languorous eyes, she sang him soft songs of love in her native Malay tongue while he ate juicy, orange-fleshed mangoes and drank tea.

Fifth Wife was staying out of sight. Last night she had seen the signs of his visit to the *divan* and her chiding finally went that one centimeter too far. Instantly he had ordered her from his room.

He appreciated her concern for his health, just as he appreciated Mademoiselle Brown's. And he was fully aware that Fifth Wife and his other women, when they dared, manipulated and maneuvered him. Well and good. He enjoyed it. But he, Tai Shan, was the final authority. And final authorities have bounds beyond which no one must trespass.

He finished the mangoes, dipped his fingers into the water bowl in which a lotus floated, dabbed his lips with a square of Swatow lace, and told Sixth Wife to summon Ah Fong and the Land Rover. When they arrived, Tai Shan proceeded to tour his domain.

He inspected the rice paddies and the rice mill. He strolled through the flower gardens. From the seat of the Land Rover he viewed the rows on rows of vegetables and the fenced fields of livestock. When finally they pulled up alongside the jetties, he said sharply, "Fong, do our boatmen engage in illicit trade?"

The Yunnanese stirred uneasily. "It is in their blood, Master."

Tai Shan's tone grew wintry. "I command that it cease."

Ah Fong understood. He climbed out and walked the length of each jetty, speaking to every man there and to every woman and every child.

The petty smuggling would now stop—for two weeks, possibly three. It could never be eradicated, Tai Shan knew, but it could be controlled and that was what was important.

When they returned to the house, he summoned Fifth Wife, and waving away her efforts at conciliation he gave her a series of instructions—Final Authority exerting its authority, he told himself drily. But he knew he could rely on his chatelaine to obey him not only explicitly but efficiently, a comforting thought when one is responsible for a domain.

Then he ate a light meal of rice with nam pa and retired for his siesta. And when he arose, rather later than usual, he found that

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Fifth Wife was following instructions and making amends to Colonel/Commissar Kham Xai by serving him citronade on the veranda.

Tai Shan greeted him, adding mildly, "I had not expected you so soon, *mon colonel*. But there is an hour or more of daylight left. Grant me the honor of escorting you around my poor and barren lands."

If Kham Xai were surprised by the cordial reception, his bony face gave no sign. What did he hope to find, Tai Shan wondered. Evidence of something illegal, no doubt. Or, failing that, first-hand knowledge on which to base trumped-up charges. Commissars were experts in trumped-up charges, with landholders their plumpest targets.

An ironic situation. For had he not saved this Colonel/Commissar from the folly of Lieutenant Vang? Even bungled assassinations can prove fatal. However—

Tai Shan would have preferred the sturdy Land Rover but he deferred to Kham Xai's insistence on making the tour in the staff car, a mud-spattered Skoda he'd driven out from the city. Probably his idea was to retain control of where they went and what they saw. Or was it simply that he did not trust the old Tiger of the Mekong?

To Tai Shan's amusement Kham Xai examined the poppies in the flowerbeds minutely. But all were of innocent varieties. Then he lingered long over his inspection of the jetties. And found nothing, of course. All signs of smuggling had disappeared immediately after Tai Shan's earlier visit.

When dusk began to fall, Kham Xai decided he had seen enough. But despite having uncovered no evidence of criminal activity, he was in good spirits. So, mused Tai Shan, the man from Hanoi thought he had seen something useful.

No matter. So long as the Lao ruled their own nation this foreigner was a nuisance, nothing more. For he, the respected Tai Shan, had Lao blood in his veins, was a Lao citizen.

But a nuisance can grow into an aggravation and a different approach from Fifth Wife's rudeness of the day before was surely prudent.

So it was with approval that he saw her standing at the top of the stairway politely awaiting their return. "*Mon colonel*, my wife is guilt-ridden by her discourtesy. Allow her to serve you a refreshing drink."

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A fine rain had begun to fall and, a model of meekness, Fifth Wife ushered them inside the house and saw them comfortably seated. From a satiny rosewood table she served them hot tea and cold Danish beer, then retired into the background. Tai Shan watched Kham Xai gulp noisily at his beer and he wondered what this uncouth nuisance of a man was planning.

Then, looking past his guest, he saw Ah Fong in the doorway. Eyes glinting yellow, Tai Shan nodded slightly. Ah Fong slipped into the room.

The Colonel Commissar struggled feebly, but it was over in moments. And when the powerful Yunnanese let Kham Xai's body slide lifeless to the floor, Tai Shan nodded again. Approvingly. The man from Hanoi was a nuisance no longer.

He signed to Fifth Wife and at once she began issuing instructions to Ah Fong. Even though gentle, the rain would have deepened the treacherous mud on the narrow rutted road to Vientiane, and the spot where Ah Fong had slewed the Mercedes around last evening would be ideal for the accident.

And the fact that the lighter, less responsive Skoda would be more susceptible to a fatal skid would add an air of authenticity.

In her efficient way Fifth Wife would continue supervising. But he, Tai Shan, the Final Authority, would also be present. For it was he who had the vast fund of experience needed to see to it that there would be no mistakes made in this, his apology to his friend Mademoiselle Brown.

The news of a fatal accident to Kham Xai would mesh perfectly with her secret report of a plot to kill him. Her headquarters would commend her, not dispense the black marks she so dreaded. Truly, Tai Shan felt, it was a handsome apology.

It crossed his mind that, oh so very delicately, she might have implanted the idea in his mind, might have maneuvered him toward the action he had taken. It did not matter. He enjoyed being maneuvered by his collection of women.

Just so long as he remained the Final Authority.

"Q"

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a LEW ARCHER detective story by

ROSS MACDONALD

Lew Archer liked Fay Hooper—that's why he was willing to take on a case for her that normally was not in his line—to find Otto, her missing dog, a black German shepherd. But it wasn't long before Lew Archer was saying to Sheriff Carlson: "You're taking this just as seriously as a real murder, aren't you?" As always, Lew Archer was the grim realist . . .

THE SLEEPING DOG

by ROSS MACDONALD

The day after her dog disappeared, Fay Hooper called me early. Her normal voice was like waltzing violins, but this morning the violins were out of tune. She sounded as though she'd been crying.

"Otto's gone."

Otto was her one-year-old German shepherd.

"He jumped the fence yesterday afternoon and ran away. Or else he was kidnaped—dognaped, I suppose is the right word to use."

"What makes you think that?"

"You know, Otto, Mr. Archer—how loyal he was. He wouldn't deliberately stay away from me overnight, not under his own power. There must be thieves involved."

She caught her breath. "I realize searching for stolen dogs isn't your métier. But you *are* a detective, and I thought, since we knew one another . . ."

She allowed her voice to suggest, ever so chastely, that we might get to know one another better.

I liked the woman. I liked the dog, I liked the breed. I was taking my own German shepherd pup to obedience school, which is where I met Fay Hooper. Otto and she were the handsomest and most expensive members of the class.

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"How do I get to your place?"

She lived in the hills north of Malibu, she said, on the far side of the county line. If she wasn't home when I got there, her husband would be.

On my way out I stopped at the dog school in Pacific Palisades to talk to the man who ran it, Fernando Rambeau. The kennels behind the house burst into clamor when I knocked on the front door. Rambeau boarded dogs as well as trained them.

A dark-haired girl looked out and informed me that her husband was feeding the animals. "Maybe I can help," she added doubtfully, and then she let me into a small living room.

I told her about the missing dog. "It would help if you called the vets and animal shelters and gave them a description," I said.

"We've already been doing that. Mrs. Hooper was on the phone to Fernando last night." She sounded vaguely resentful. "I'll get him."

Setting her face against the continuing noise, she went out the back door. Rambeau came in with her, wiping his hands on a rag. He was a square-shouldered Canadian with a curly black beard that failed to conceal his youth. Over the beard, his intense dark eyes peered at me warily, like an animal's sensing trouble.

Rambeau handled dogs as if he loved them. He wasn't quite so patient with human beings. His current class was only in its third week, but he was already having dropouts. The man was loaded with explosive feeling, and it was close to the surface now.

"I'm sorry about Mrs. Hooper and her dog. They were my best pupils. He was, anyway. But I can't drop everything and spend the next week looking for him."

"Nobody expects that. I take it you've had no luck with your contacts."

"I don't have such good contacts. Marie and I, we just moved down here last year, from British Columbia."

"That was a mistake," his wife said from the doorway.

Rambeau pretended not to hear her. "Anyway, I know nothing about dog thieves." With both hands he pushed the possibility away from him. "If I hear any word of the dog I'll let you know, naturally. I've got nothing against Mrs. Hooper."

His wife gave him a quick look. It was one of those revealing looks which said, among other things, that she loved him but didn't know if he loved her, and she was worried about him. She caught me watching her and lowered her eyes. Then she burst

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out, "Do you think somebody killed the dog?"

"I have no reason to think so."

"Some people shoot dogs, don't they?"

"Not around here," Rambeau said. "Maybe back in the bush someplace." He turned to me with a sweeping explanatory gesture. "These things make her nervous and she gets wild ideas. You know Marie is a country girl—"

"I am not. I was born in Chilliwack." Flinging a bitter look at him, she left the room.

"Was Otto shot?" I asked Rambeau.

"Not that I know of. Listen, Mr. Archer, you're a good customer, but I can't stand here talking all day. I've got twenty dogs to feed."

They were still barking when I drove up the coast highway out of hearing. It was nearly 40 miles to the Hoopers' mailbox, and another mile up a black-top lane which climbed the side of a canyon to the gate. On both sides of the heavy wire gate, which had a new combination padlock on it, a hurricane fence, eight feet high and topped with barbed wire, extended out of sight. Otto would have to be quite a jumper to clear it. So would I.

The house beyond the gate was low and massive, made of fieldstone and steel and glass. I honked at it and waited. A man in blue bathing trunks came out of the house with a shotgun. The sun glinted on its twin barrels and on the man's bald head and round, brown, burnished belly. He walked quite slowly, a short heavy man in his sixties, scuffling along in huaraches. The flabby brown shell of fat on him jiggled lugubriously.

When he approached the gate, I could see the stiff gray pallor under his tan, like stone showing under varnish. He was sick, or afraid, or both. His mouth was profoundly discouraged.

"What do you want?" he said over the shotgun.

"Mrs. Hooper asked me to help find her dog. My name is Lew Archer."

He was not impressed. "My wife isn't here, and I'm busy. I happen to be following soy-bean futures rather closely."

"Look here, I've come quite a distance to lend a hand. I met Mrs. Hooper at dog school and—"

Hooper uttered a short savage laugh. "That hardly constitutes an introduction to either of us. You'd better be on your way right now."

"I think I'll wait for your wife."

"I think you won't." He raised the shotgun and let me look into

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its close-set, hollow, round eyes. "This is my property all the way down to the road, and you're trespassing. That means I can shoot you if I have to."

"What sense would that make? I came out here to help you."

"You can't help me." He looked at me through the wire gate with a kind of pathetic arrogance, like a lion that had grown old in captivity. "Go away."

I drove back down to the road and waited for Fay Hooper. The sun slid up the sky. The inside of my car turned oven-hot. I went for a walk down the canyon. The brown September grass crunched under my feet. Away up on the far side of the canyon an earth mover that looked like a crazy red insect was cutting the ridge to pieces.

A very fast black car came up the canyon and stopped abruptly beside me. A gaunt man in a wrinkled brown suit climbed out, with his hand on his holster, told me that he was Sheriff Carlson, and asked me what I was doing there. I told him.

He pushed back his wide cream-colored hat and scratched at his hairline. The pale eyes in his sun-fired face were like clouded glass inserts in a brick wall.

"I'm surprised Mr. Hooper takes that attitude. Mrs. Hooper just came to see me in the courthouse. But I can't take you up there with me if Mr. Hooper says no."

"Why not?"

"He owns most of the county and holds the mortgage on the rest of it. Besides," he added with careful logic, "Mr. Hooper is a friend of mine."

"Then you better get him a keeper."

The sheriff glanced around uneasily, as if the Hoopers' mailbox might be bugged. "I'm surprised he has a gun, let alone threatening you with it. He must be upset about the dog."

"He didn't seem to care about the dog."

"He does, though. *She* cares, so *he* cares," Carlson said.

"What did she have to tell you?"

"She can talk to you herself. She should be along any minute. She told me that she was going to follow me out of town."

He drove his black car up the lane. A few minutes later Fay Hooper stopped her Mercedes at the mailbox. She must have seen the impatience on my face. She got out and came toward me in a little run, making noises of dismayed regret.

Fay was in her late thirties and fading slightly, as if a light

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frost had touched her pale gold head, but she was still a beautiful woman. She turned the gentle force of her charm on me.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she said. "Have I kept you waiting long?"

"Your husband did. He ran me off with a shotgun."

Her gloved hand lighted on my arm, and stayed. She had an electric touch, even through layers of cloth.

"That's terrible. I had no idea that Allan still had a gun."

Her mouth was blue behind her lipstick, as if the information had chilled her to the marrow. She took me up the hill in the Mercedes. The gate was standing open, but she didn't drive in right away.

"I might as well be perfectly frank," she said without looking at me. "Ever since Otto disappeared yesterday, there's been a nagging question in my mind. What you've just told me raises the question again. I was in town all day yesterday so that Otto was alone here with Allan when—when it happened."

The values her voice gave to the two names made it sound as if Allan were the dog and Otto the husband.

"When what happened, Mrs. Hooper?" I wanted to know.

Her voice sank lower. "I can't help suspecting that Allan shot him. He's never liked any of my dogs. The only dogs he appreciates are hunting dogs—and he was particularly jealous of Otto. Besides, when I got back from town, Allan was getting the ground ready to plant some roses. He's never enjoyed gardening, particularly in the heat. We have professionals to do our work. And this really isn't the time of year to put in a bed of roses."

"You think your husband was planting a dog?" I asked.

"If he was, I have to know." She turned toward me, and the leather seat squeaked softly under her movement. "Find out for me, Mr. Archer. If Allan killed my beautiful big old dog, I couldn't stay with him."

"Something you said implied that Allan used to have a gun or guns, but gave them up. Is that right?"

"He had a small arsenal when I married him. He was an infantry officer in the war and a big-game hunter in peacetime. But he swore off hunting years ago."

"Why?"

"I don't really know. We came home from a hunting trip one fall and Allan sold all his guns. He never said a word about it to me but it was the fall after the war ended, and I always thought

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that it must have had something to do with the war."

"Have you been married so long?"

"Thank you for that question." She produced a rueful smile. "I met Allan during the war, the year I came out, and I knew I'd met my fate. He was a very powerful person."

"And a very wealthy one."

She gave me a flashing, haughty look and stepped so hard on the accelerator that she almost ran into the sheriff's car parked in front of the house. We walked around to the back, past a free-form swimming pool that looked inviting, into a walled garden. A few Greek statues stood around in elegant disrepair. Bees murmured like distant bombers among the flowers.

The bed where Allan Hooper had been digging was about five feet long and three feet wide, and it reminded me of graves.

"Get me a spade," I said.

"Are you going to dig him up?"

"You're pretty sure he's in there, aren't you, Mrs. Hooper?"

"I guess I am."

From a lath house at the end of the garden she fetched a square-edged spade. I asked her to stick around.

I took off my jacket and hung it on a marble torso where it didn't look too bad. It was easy digging in the newly worked soil. In a few minutes I was two feet below the surface, and the ground was still soft and penetrable.

The edge of my space struck something soft but not so penetrable. Fay Hooper heard the peculiar dull sound it made. She made a dull sound of her own. I scooped away more earth. Dog fur sprouted like stiff black grass at the bottom of the grave.

Fay got down on her knees and began to dig with her lacquered fingernails. Once she cried out in a loud harsh voice, "Dirty murderer!"

Her husband must have heard her. He came out of the house and looked over the stone wall. His head seemed poised on top of the wall, hairless and bodiless, like Humpty-Dumpty. He had that look on his face, of not being able to be put together again.

"I didn't kill your dog, Fay. Honest to God, I didn't."

She didn't hear him. She was talking to Otto. "Poor boy, poor boy," she said. "Poor, beautiful boy."

Sheriff Carlson came into the garden. He reached down into the grave and freed the dog's head from the earth. His large hands moved gently on the great wedge of the skull.

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Fay knelt beside him in torn and dirty stockings. "What are you doing?"

Carlson held up a red-tipped finger. "Your dog was shot through the head, Mrs. Hooper, but it's no shotgun wound. Looks to me more like a deer rifle."

"I don't even own a rifle," Hooper said over the wall. "I haven't owned one for nearly twenty years. Anyway, I wouldn't shoot your dog."

Fay scrambled to her feet. She looked ready to climb the wall. "Then why did you bury him?"

His mouth opened and closed.

"Why did you buy a shotgun without telling me?"

"For protection."

"Against my dog?"

Hooper shook his head. He edged along the wall and came in tentatively through the gate. He had on slacks and a short-sleeved yellow jersey which somehow emphasized his shortness and his fatness and his age.

"Mr. Hooper had some threatening calls," the sheriff said. "Somebody got hold of his unlisted number. He was just telling me about it now."

"Why didn't you tell me, Allan?"

"I didn't want to alarm you. You weren't the one they were after, anyway. I bought a shotgun and kept it in my study."

"Do you know who they are?"

"No. I make enemies in the course of business, especially the farming operations. Some crackpot shot your dog, gunning for me. I heard a shot and found him dead in the driveway."

"But how could you bury him without telling me?"

Hooper spread his hands in front of him. "I wasn't thinking too well. I felt guilty, I suppose, because whoever got him was after me. And I didn't want you to see him dead. I guess I wanted to break it to you gently."

"This is gently?"

"It's not the way I planned it. I thought if I had a chance to get you another pup—"

"No one will ever take Otto's place."

Allan Hooper stood and looked at her wistfully across the open grave, as if he would have liked to take Otto's place. After a while the two of them went into the house.

Carlson and I finished digging Otto up and carried him out to

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the sheriff's car. His inert blackness filled the trunk from side to side.

"What are you going to do with him, Sheriff?" I asked.

"Get a vet I know to recover the slug in him. Then if we nab the sniper we can use ballistics to convict him."

"You're taking this just as seriously as a real murder, aren't you?" I observed.

"They want me to," he said with a respectful look toward the house.

Mrs. Hooper came out carrying a white leather suitcase which she deposited in the back seat of her Mercedes.

"Are you going someplace?" I asked her.

"Yes, I am." She didn't say where.

Her husband, who was watching her from the doorway, didn't speak. The Mercedes went away. He closed the door. Both of them had looked sick.

"She doesn't seem to believe he didn't do it. Do you, Sheriff?"

Carlson jabbed me with his forefinger. "Mr. Hooper is no liar. If you want to get along with me, get that through your head. I've known Mr. Hooper for over twenty years—served under him in the war—and I never heard him twist the truth."

"I'll have to take your word for it. What about those threatening phone calls? Did he report them to you before today?"

"No."

"What was said on the phone?"

"He didn't tell me."

"Does Hooper have any idea who shot the dog?"

"Well, he did say he saw a man slinking around outside the fence. He didn't get close enough to the guy to give me a good description, but he did make out that he had a black beard."

"There's a dog trainer in Pacific Palisades named Rambeau who fits the description. Mrs. Hooper has been taking Otto to his school."

"Rambeau?" Carlson said with interest.

"Fernando Rambeau. He seemed pretty upset when I talked to him this morning."

"What did he say?"

"A good deal less than he knows, I think. I'll talk to him again."

Rambeau was not at home. My repeated knocking was answered only by the barking of the dogs. I retreated up the

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highway to a drive-in where I ate a torpedo sandwich. When I was on my second cup of coffee, Marie Rambeau drove by in a pickup truck. I followed her home.

"Where's Fernando?" I asked.

"I don't know. I've been out looking for him."

"Is he in a bad way?"

"I don't know how you mean."

"Emotionally upset."

"He has been ever since that woman came into the class."

"Mrs. Hooper?"

Her head bobbed slightly.

"Are they having an affair?"

"They better not be." Her small red mouth looked quite implacable. "He was out with her night before last. I heard him make the date. He was gone all night, and when he came home he was on one of his black drunks and he wouldn't go to bed. He sat in the kitchen and drank himself glassy-eyed." She got out of the pickup facing me. "Is shooting a dog a very serious crime?"

"It is to me, but not to the law. It's not like shooting a human being."

"It would be to Fernando. He loves dogs the way other people love human beings. That included Otto."

"But he shot him."

Her head drooped. I could see the straight white part dividing her black hair. "I'm afraid he did. He's got a crazy streak and it comes out in him when he drinks. You should have heard him in the kitchen yesterday morning. He was moaning and groaning about his brother."

"His brother?"

"Fernando had an older brother, George, who died back in Canada after the war. Fernando was just a kid when it happened and it was a big loss to him. His parents were dead, too, and they put him in a foster home in Chilliwack. He still has nightmares about it."

"What did his brother die of?"

"He never told me exactly, but I think he was shot in some kind of hunting accident. George was a guide and packer in the Fraser River valley below Mount Robson. That's where Fernando comes from, the Mount Robson country. He won't go back, on account of what happened to his brother."

"What did he say about his brother yesterday?" I asked.

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"That he was going to get his revenge for George. I got so scared I couldn't listen to him. I went out and fed the dogs. When I came back in, Fernando was loading his deer rifle. I asked him what he was planning to do, but he walked right out and drove away."

"May I see the rifle?"

"It isn't in the house. I looked for it after he left today. He must have taken it with him again. I'm so afraid that he'll kill somebody."

"What's he driving?"

"Our car. It's an old blue Meteor sedan."

Keeping an eye out for it, I drove up the highway to the Hoopers' canyon. Everything there was very peaceful. Too peaceful. Just inside the locked gate, Allan Hooper was lying face down on his shotgun. I could see small ants in single file trekking across the crown of his bald head.

I got a hammer out of the trunk on my car and used it to break the padlock. I lifted his head. His skin was hot in the sun, as if death had fallen on him like a fever. But he had been shot neatly between the eyes. There was no exit wound; the bullet was still in his head. Now the ants were crawling on my hands.

I found my way into the Hoopers' study, turned off the stuttering teletype, and sat down under an elk head to telephone the courthouse. Carlson was in his office.

"I have bad news, Sheriff. Allan Hooper's been shot."

I heard him draw in his breath quickly. "Is he dead?"

"Extremely dead. You better put out a general alarm for Rambeau."

Carlson said with gloomy satisfaction, "I already have him."

"You have him?"

"That's correct. I picked him up in the Hoopers' canyon and brought him in just a few minutes ago." Carlson's voice sank to a mournful mumble. "I picked him up a little too late, I guess."

"Did Rambeau do any talking?"

"He hasn't had a chance to yet. When I stopped his car, he piled out and threatened me with a rifle. I clobbered him one good."

I went outside to wait for Carlson and his men. A very pale afternoon moon hung like a ghost in the sky. For some reason it made me think of Fay. She ought to be here. It occurred to me that possibly she had been.

I went and looked at Hooper's body again. He had nothing to

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tell me. He lay as if he had fallen from a height, perhaps all the way from the moon.

They came in a black county wagon and took him away. I followed them inland to the county seat, which rose like a dusty island in a dark green lake of orange groves. We parked in the courthouse parking lot, and the sheriff and I went inside.

Rambeau was under guard in a second-floor room with barred windows. Carlson said it was used for interrogation. There was nothing in the room but an old deal table and some wooden chairs. Rambeau sat hunched forward on one of them, his hands hanging limp between his knees. Part of his head had been shaved and plastered with bandages.

"I had to cool him with my gun butt," Carlson said. "You're lucky I didn't shoot you—you know that, Fernando?"

Rambeau made no response. His black eyes were set and dull.

"Had his rifle been fired?"

"Yeah. Chet Scott is working on it now. Chet's my identification lieutenant and he's a bear on ballistics." The sheriff turned back to Rambeau. "You might as well give us a full confession, boy. If you shot Mr. Hooper and his dog, we can link the bullets to your gun. You know that."

Rambeau didn't speak or move.

"What did you have against Mr. Hooper?" Carlson said.

No answer. Rambeau's mouth was set like a trap in the thicket of his beard.

"Your older brother," I said to him, "was killed in a hunting accident in British Columbia. Was Hooper at the other end of the gun that killed George?"

Rambeau didn't answer me, but Carlson's head came up. "Where did you get that, Archer?"

"From a couple of things I was told. According to Rambeau's wife, he was talking yesterday about revenge for his brother's death. According to Fay Hooper, her husband swore off guns when he came back from a hunting trip after the war. Would you know if that trip was to British Columbia?"

"Yeah. Mr. Hooper took me and the wife with him."

"Whose wife?"

"Both our wives."

"To the Mount Robson area?"

"That's correct. We went up after elk."

"And did he shoot somebody accidentally?"

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"Not that I know of. I wasn't with him all the time, understand. He often went out alone, or with Mrs. Hooper," Carlson replied.

"Did he use a packer named George Rambeau?"

"I wouldn't know. Ask Fernando here."

I asked Fernando. He didn't speak or move. Only his eyes had changed. They were wet and glistening-black, visible parts of a grief that filled his head like a dark underground river.

The questioning went on and produced nothing. It was night when I went outside. The moon was slipping down behind the dark hills. I took a room in a hotel and checked in with my answering service in Hollywood.

About an hour before, Fay Hooper had called me from a Las Vegas hotel. When I tried to return the call, she wasn't in her room and didn't respond to paging. I left a message for her to come home, that her husband was dead.

Next, I called R.C.M.P. headquarters in Vancouver to ask some questions about George Rambeau. The answers came over the line in clipped Canadian tones. George and his dog had disappeared from his cabin below Red Pass in the fall of 1945. Their bodies hadn't been recovered until the following May, and by that time they consisted of parts of the two skeletons. These included George Rambeau's skull, which had been pierced in the right front and left rear quadrants by a heavy-caliber bullet. The bullet had not been recovered. Who fired it, or when, or why, had never been determined. The dog, a husky, had also been shot through the head.

I walked over to the courthouse to pass the word to Carlson. He was in the basement shooting gallery with Lieutenant Scott, who was firing test rounds from Fernando Rambeau's .30/30 repeater.

I gave them the official account of the accident. "But since George Rambeau's dog was shot, too, it probably wasn't an accident," I said.

"I see what you mean," Carlson said. "It's going to be rough, spreading all this stuff out in court about Mr. Hooper. We have to nail it down, though."

I went back to my hotel and to bed, but the process of nailing down the case against Rambeau continued through the night. By morning Lieutenant Scott had detailed comparisons set up between the test-fired slugs and the ones dug out of Hooper and the dog.

I looked at his evidence through a comparison microscope. It

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left no doubt in my mind that the slugs that killed Allan Hooper and the dog, Otto, had come from Rambeau's gun.

But Rambeau still wouldn't talk, even to phone his wife or ask for a lawyer.

"We'll take you out to the scene of the crime," Carlson said. "I've cracked tougher nuts than you, boy."

We rode in the back seat of his car with Fernando handcuffed between us. Lieutenant Scott did the driving. Rambeau groaned and pulled against his handcuffs. He was very close to the breaking point, I thought.

It came a few minutes later when the car turned up the lane past the Hoopers' mailbox. He burst into sudden fierce tears as if a pressure gauge in his head had broken. It was strange to see a bearded man crying like a boy. "I don't want to go up there."

"Because you shot him?" Carlson said.

"I shot the dog. I confess I shot the dog," Rambeau said.

"And the man?"

"No!" he cried. "I never killed a man. Mr. Hooper was the one who did. He followed my brother out in the woods and shot him."

"If you knew that," I said, "why didn't you tell the Mounties years ago?"

"I didn't know it then. I was seven years old. How would I understand? When Mrs. Hooper came to our cabin to be with my brother, how would I know it was a serious thing? Or when Mr. Hooper asked me if she had been there? I didn't know he was her husband. I thought he was her father checking up. I knew I shouldn't have told him—I could see it in his face the minute after—but I didn't understand the situation till the other night, when I talked to Mrs. Hooper."

"Did she know that her husband had shot George?"

"She didn't even know George had been killed. They never went back to the Fraser River after nineteen forty-five. But when we put our facts together, we agreed he must have done it. I came out here next morning to get even. The dog came out to the gate. It wasn't real to me—I'd been drinking most of the night—it wasn't real to me until the dog went down. I shot him. Mr. Hooper shot *my* dog. But when he came out of the house himself, I couldn't pull the trigger. I yelled at him and ran away."

"What did you yell?" I said.

"The same thing I told him on the telephone: 'Remember Mount Robson.' "

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A yellow cab, which looked out of place in the canyon, came over the ridge above us. Lieutenant Scott waved it to a stop. The driver said he'd just brought Mrs. Hooper home from the airport and wanted to know if that constituted a felony. Scott waved him on.

"I wonder what she was doing at the airport," Carlson said.

"Coming home from Vegas. She tried to call me from there last night. I forgot to tell you."

"You don't forget important things like that," Carlson said.

"I suppose I wanted her to come home under her own power."

"In case she shot her husband?"

"More or less."

"She didn't. Fernando shot him, didn't you, boy?"

"I shot the dog. I am innocent of the man." He turned to me. "Tell her that. Tell her I am sorry about the dog. I came out here to surrender the gun and tell her yesterday. I don't trust myself with guns."

"With darn good reason," Carlson said. "We know you shot Mr. Hooper. Ballistic evidence doesn't lie."

Rambeau screeched in his ear, "You're a liar! You're all liars!"

Carlson swung his open hand against the side of Rambeau's face. "Don't call me names, little man."

Lieutenant Scott spoke without taking his eyes from the road. "I wouldn't hit him, Chief. You wouldn't want to damage our case."

Carlson subsided, and we drove on up to the house. Carlson went in without knocking. The guard at the door discouraged me from following him.

I couldn't hear Fay's voice on the other side of the door, too low to be understood. Carlson said something to her.

"Get out! Get out of my house, you killer!" Fay cried out sharply.

Carlson didn't come out. I went in instead. One of his arms was wrapped around her body, the other hand was covering her mouth. I got his Adam's apple in the crook of my left arm, pulled him away from her, and threw him over my left hip. He went down clanking and got up holding his revolver.

He should have shot me right away. But he gave Fay Hooper time to save my life.

She stepped in front of me. "Shoot me, Mr. Carlson. You might as well. You shot the one man I ever cared for."

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"Your husband shot George Rambeau, if that's who you mean. I ought to know. I was there." Carlson scowled down at his gun and replaced it in his holster.

Lieutenant Scott was watching him from the doorway.

"You were there?" I said to Carlson. "Yesterday you told me Hooper was alone when he shot Rambeau."

"He was. When I said I was there, I meant in the general neighborhood."

"Don't believe him," Fay said. "He fired the gun that killed George, and it was no accident. The two of them hunted George down in the woods. My husband planned to shoot him himself, but George's dog came at him and he had to dispose of it. By that time George had drawn a bead on Allan. Mr. Carlson shot him. It was hardly a coincidence that the next spring Allan financed his campaign for sheriff."

"She's making it up," Carlson said. "She wasn't within ten miles of the place."

"But you were, Mr. Carlson, and so was Allan. He told me the whole story yesterday, after we found Otto. Once that happened, he knew that everything was bound to come out. I already suspected him, of course, after I talked to Fernando. Allan filled in the details himself. He thought, since he hadn't killed George personally, I would be able to forgive him. But I couldn't. I left him and flew to Nevada, intending to divorce him. I've been intending to for twenty years."

Carlson said, "Are you sure you didn't shoot him before you left?"

"How could she have?" I said. "Ballistics don't lie, and the ballistic evidence says he was shot with Fernando's rifle. Nobody had access to it but Fernando—and you. You stopped him on the road and knocked him out, took his rifle, and used it to kill Hooper. You killed him for the same reason that Hooper buried the dog—to keep the past buried. You thought Hooper was the only witness to the murder of George Rambeau. But by that time Mrs. Hooper knew about it, too."

"It wasn't murder. It was self-defense, just like in the war. Anyway, you'll never hang it on me."

"We don't have to. We'll hang Hooper on you. How about it, Lieutenant?"

Scott nodded grimly, not looking at his chief. I relieved Carlson of his gun. He winced, as if I were amputating part of his body.

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He offered no resistance when Scott took him out to the car.

I stayed behind for a final word with Fay. "Fernando asked me to tell you he's sorry for shooting your dog."

"We're both sorry." She stood with her eyes down, as if the past was swirling visibly around her feet. "I'll talk to Fernando later. Much later."

"There's one coincidence that bothers me. How did you happen to take your dog to his school?"

"I happened to see his sign, and Fernando Rambeau isn't a common name. I couldn't resist going there. I had to know what had happened to George. I think perhaps Fernando came to California for the same reason."

"Now you both know," I said.

THE EVIDENCE YOU WILL HEAR, by Hamilton Jobson. Charles Scribner's Sons, $6.95

Three little girls have been kidnapped and later found murdered. A fourth is missing and her distracted parents and neighbors fear the worst. In this fast-moving police procedural by a former British policeman, a suspect is tracked down by the police, but he has an alibi and it seems to be unbreakable. The reader knows he is guilty and the suspense lies in whether he will be caught and convicted. The culmination comes in a tense and skillfully handled court scene.

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DEAL 'EM, CHICK!

by S. S. RAFFERTY

When the tote board at the track reads 99 to 1, that's not necessarily the odds spread. It just means that there is no more room left to compute how big a disaster you're getting into. When I opened my big mouth and challenged one of the largest gambling syndicates in the country to a game of chance, the odds on my living through it were roughly 4,000,000 to 1. Any takers?

The little minuet started tuning up when Sam Sidlock walked into the night club I ran on Third Avenue and asked for $50,000. Sam is a front man for the mob's East Coast gambling operations. He's like a vice-president, only his secretaries carry guns and other tools of the collector's trade. Sam had two secretaries with him, just in case he wanted to do some dictating.

"Fifty grand!" I said to him when he laid it on me. Sam and I were sitting in a booth in the bar lounge. The secretaries skulked over at the bar.

"That's what he owes us, Chick, fifty biggies. He's in safekeeping, and we thought, since he's your buddy, you might want to square the tab and get him back. We don't want to hurt anybody."

That's rich. His two goons would gladly rip off both your ears and then make you play *Name That Tune*. The "anybody" in this case was Ling, my headwaiter. Ling confuses customers because they keep ordering Moo Goo Guy Pan and Wonton soup. We sell

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steaks and chops. Ling *is* my buddy, and he is also the most compulsive gambler this side of the oil sheiks. When the track closes, he makes for a crap game. When that folds, he'll find a card game, and when the whole town shuts down, he goes to Chinatown for early morning fantan. Now he owes the boys a lot of money, and they want me to ransom him.

I'd like to play for time, but these guys are in the "yes or no" business. I want to bail Ling out, sure, but I'm in hock to the banks and a few ex-wives. Sam sits there calmly snapping drink stirrers, and I'm on the think.

They won't buy an installment payoff, that I know. I could offer them a piece of the club's action, but when they see the books, it would be off-with-my-ears time. I can't even go to the loan sharks, because the mob would consider that taking it out of one pocket to fill another.

I start running around the various departments that make up my brain. The Courage Department is closed for the day, and the Business Sense Department went bankrupt years ago. However, the Psychology Department had a light burning, so I entered and used its services. Of course, I did this without consulting the Common Sense Department, which was my first mistake. The second was opening my mouth and letting the words fall out.

"You know, Sam," I said, "we have an interesting situation here. You're out fifty thou because of Lady Luck. Why not use her again?"

"Now I know why you're an *ex*-comic. If you're thinking about a double-or-nothing bet, you're nuts."

"Remember, Sam"—I shook my finger at him—"a good base stealer should only go down with the pitcher's motion. Hear the entire proposition before you break up the ball game."

He grunted. Sam grunts in the key of F—for fiercely.

"Let's face some hard cold facts, Sam. You guys need some good public relations."

"Who the hell said so?"

"The public, Sam. *Vox populi*. The voters. You have State-run horse parlors here in New York, and they're talking about State casinos over in Jersey. Connecticut's got a lottery. Man, the government is killing your franchise."

"Yeah, you know why? 'Cause the government is glomming onto all the good things. The private citizen doesn't stand a chance any more."

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Next he'll be telling me he's for home rule.

"Now here's a chance to either collect your money or, if you lose, to give yourselves a good public image."

"Only suckers give out double-or-nothing chances, Kelly. You're hip to that. Besides, we ain't losing that much to the State, because a book gives credit."

"And if the creditor doesn't pay, you clobber him. Sure, you'll always have the big bettors and the compulsive cats, but eventually that's like running a bar for swells and alcoholics. The swell doesn't need you and the boozers go Tap City."

"So we let Ling double up and maybe get off the hook? And if he loses, then what?"

"As the lawyers say, that's a two-part question. Let's deal with the win part. That's where the public relations comes in. I'm not proposing that you just give Ling another crack at the ponies. I'm suggesting that, for once, you let the little guy, all the Lings, see that you are sportsmen, gentlemen.

"Now here's the way it works, Sam. Remember I said *gentlemen*, so let's have a tournament match. A challenge of skill. A challenge of chance. See how that starts to become poetry. We spread the word around that your people have accepted a challenge where a little guy can pick any game he wants, and he has to play it against any guy you pick. Now that's sporting, Sam. Think of all those voters in the future going out to all those referendums with cheer in their hearts for the people in your business."

"What if Ling loses?"

"Then, Sam, you are in the night-club business."

"This place?"

"The very same. It's certainly worth more than fifty G's."

He snapped another stirrer. "You know, you have an awful lot of mouth, but I like the idea. But if I went through with it, Ling isn't the player. He stays under wraps. *You* play for him."

"Me? Oh, come on, Sam, everybody knows what a rotten percentage player I am."

He gave me a man-eating grin. "I know, Kelly, I know. That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

I think the dons at Oxford would call it getting hoist on your own petard. On Third Avenue we call it putting your foot in your mouth and biting off your toe. To be a good gambler you have to have solid concentration. My own is akin to a wounded

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bumblebee's. You also have to be able to calculate odds in your head. I'm a mathematical cretin and am so certified by a number of teachers. It's called an F-rating.

Here I was putting the hustle on Sam, thinking Ling would be the player. That may sound crazy, seeing he was in for so much money, but his problem isn't skill. He just plays so often and so long that the odds turn against him. Hell, with him, we stood a chance against any pro they brought in. With me it was like selling a round-trip ticket on the *Titanic*.

"Well, funnyman, are you in or out?"

"Oh, I'm in, Sam. We need to set this up properly, which could take a few days. We need a neutral place and a referee acceptable to both of us."

"A referee? What are you going to do, play tennis?"

"Let's keep it nice and sportsmanlike. You got any suggestions?"

"Let's see. We could bring in Duke Dorfman. He's the dealer for all the mainline games."

"That's not neutral enough. There's too much Vegas in his blood. How about a clergyman?"

"Nah. Even if we could find one willing, we'd have to make a donation."

"Wait, Sam. Why not a true sportsman, like a polo player or yachtsman? Those guys are too square to take sides."

He grunted again.

"Tell you what. Let's set this up for Sunday. *The Times* on Sunday always has pictures of the Ivy League types after polo matches and dog shows. To keep it neutral, we wait until Sunday and select a cat who's in the paper. That way he knows from zero about us until the match."

"Suppose he won't go along?"

"He will if we snatch him."

He swore in a foreign tongue and came near swallowing his own. "Kidnap a stiff shirt? That's a Federal rap!"

"The guy will love it, believe me. For the first time in his life he'll be in on some real action."

"I'll have to think about that, Kelly. What game do you want to play—poker, roulette, craps?"

"Well, Sam, you have the edge by being able to send any pro in the country against me, so let's be fair and say I pick the game just before the match."

I got the grin again. Sam has nice white teeth, like Dracula.

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"Sure, Chick, you pick any game you want." He got up and the secretaries followed on cue. "We'll settle everything Sunday morning, Kelly. No tricks."

Now if you think Sam Sidlock is a sucker because he bit, you don't know big-time gamblers. He can't lose either way on this deal, because he'll spread the word far and wide and make book on the outcome of the match. I knew that was why he said he liked the idea in the first place.

So here it is Thursday night and El Dopo has to come up with a game he can master by Sunday. It's time to set up a training camp and call a council of war.

When the club closed for the night, we were all sitting around a table in the main dining room. Mario Puccini, who drives a limousine for hire, mostly for me, was saying, "We got to be careful, 'cause they'll bring in a mechanic that can deal anything."

"I'll watch that end of it," Jack McCarthy, my kitchen manager, said. "I've seen the best ones work and I can spot a haymaker shuffle from fifty yards."

"Maybe I'll choose poker," I said. "I get lucky once in a while."

"Insanity!" Mario chimes in. "What are the odds on improving a one-pair hand to two pair on a three-card draw?"

I shrugged.

"It's five and a half to one, but that's not the point. You're no poker player, Chick."

Barry Kantrowitz, my present partner and ex-agent, is scratching his bald head. "Chick darling, I think you need strategy, plain and simple. Now the deal is that you play a *game*, but who says it has to be cards? Let's use our heads, boys, and throw them off balance. Maybe a game like chess."

"Barry," I said disgustedly, "I don't know a rook from a castle."

He shook his head. "I definitely see what you mean. Dominoes, maybe?"

"Marrone." Mario's in again. "You know the combinations in that game? Chick would live in the boneyard."

"And if I lose, that's where I'll be, Mario. But Barry has something here, the off-balance bit. Let's make a list of possibilities." Cuz, the night bar man, said he'd play stenographer.

After three hours we went through a hundred games, and we had a list. It read:

backgammon
checkers

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cribbage
Liar's craps
Scrabble

Even out of this it seemed the only thing I was good at was Liar's craps. Then Guido LaSalle, my head chef who had been quietly guzzling Cheval Blanc '49, came to. Guido doesn't consider himself a chef any more. He says my clientele's demand for steaks and chops have turned him into a grilliarde, and in Europe a grilliarde is allowed to drink as much as he wants to, because it's hot work. I don't know if European joints allow the help to slug down thirty-four-bucks-a-bottle wine, but in my place, if Guido should ever perspire on your steak, you can consider it seasoning.

"Chick," he says, taking a sip, "you are following fools. If you listen to Guido it will be worth your while."

What have I got to lose? Today alone I have $102 invested in him. I give him the nod.

"You show good sense now. Chick, I have worked the finest hotels and casinos. Believe me, I know gamblers, my son. Or better, I know there is no such thing as a gambler. Only imbeciles. Professionals don't take chances, and this Sam Sidlock is no exception. This non-card game approach is the first thing he will think of and prepare for. He will have an expert on call for all the games you could mention."

Barry said, "He's right there, Chick. Sam has the open end."

"So you should play a game which evens up the odds"—Guido went on sipping—"a game they don't know or the chances of them knowing are small. Then you can practise and go in ahead."

"You got a game, Guido?"

"Chick, I have The Game for you. This will be a two-player confrontation, so that eliminates a few I could mention which are rare and for multiple players. I suggest bezique."

"Be-zeke, what the hell is be-zeke?" Jack McCarthy asked.

"It is a form of pinochle, which makes it legitimate. Sidlock can't cry foul. But I am not going to teach Chick plain or Rubicon bezique. I'm going to teach him Six Pack bezique, a masterful game with one hundred and ninety-two cards and six duplicates each of the seven through ace cards."

I gulped. "That sounds pretty complex, Guido."

"The complexity is its simplicity. You won't be an expert, but you'll know more than your opponent."

I looked at the guys. "What do you think, fellas? Jack Mac?"

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"Well, suppose Sidlock does cry foul?"

"I will bring a rule book with me," Guido said. "They will have time to learn it. Let's say an hour. Any good card player should know pinochle, so we, as Chick always says, hit Fat City."

So we went for it. All Thursday night and all day Friday I played cards. I learned all about declarations and carto blanche and bezique markers and first marriage and a lot of other things. All this with Guido breathing Cheval Blanc '49 fumes at me.

By Saturday morning I really had learned the bloody game and was feeling pretty confident. The Sidlock troops were feeling the same way, because the morning line against me was 10 to 1, and by Saturday night it was 15 to 1. I got down 3 G's on myself. What the hell, if I lost, the goons were going to kill me because the club was in hock. Why not go big? It's my style.

It was around eleven o'clock Saturday night when Sam Sidlock dropped by to say that he would go along with using a swell as a referee, but it shouldn't be a snatch. I didn't know if he was setting me up or not. I had built the kidnap scheme into the mix because I wanted an edge on Sammy-boy. A Federal rap would give me bargaining power if he decided to get cute. But even having an outsider who hadn't been kidnaped was a help. Sam wasn't going to knock off a big shot just to get my club. I told him okay, we would approach the guy and make a straight proposition.

"What section of tomorrow's *Times* do you want to pick the guy from?"

Very cute play on his part. The Sunday *Times* is out on the street by nine o'clock Saturday night. He probably got a copy when it came off the presses at seven p.m. I had my copy at 7:05. "We'll leave that till the morning, Sam. One of your guys and one of my guys will make the pitch together."

He looked a little disappointed because I didn't bite. His way, he would only have had to intimidate the few people whose pictures were in one section. Now he had to scare at least 100 people whose pix were all over the paper, which it wasn't likely he'd do.

Around one o'clock that morning I came off the floor after doing the midnight show and there was Jack McCarthy waiting with my overcoat.

"What's this, Jack?"

"Your coat. You're going home to bed, Champ."

"I'm playing a few hands of the Game with Guido."

"You're overtrained now. Bed for you."

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"If you're playing Knobby Walsh, you ought to have a towel around your neck and a bucket in your hand. Who appointed you my manager, anyway?"

"You did, Champ."

"You're my *kitchen* manager, and stop calling me 'Champ.' I feel punchy enough already."

By two o'clock he was making such a pest of himself that I did go home. For the first time since I was 14, I was asleep before the sun came up. Training, like war, is hell. Just before I left the club, old Knobby whispered to me, "And no broads, Champ." That was another new experience.

When I woke up around seven, I could smell bacon and eggs and coffee and toast mixing in the apartment air. Usually the air smells of nicotine, stale perfume, and empty booze glasses. I got out of bed and padded to the kitchen.

Debby Woo, Ling's wife, had let herself in and was making with the pots and pans.

I said from the doorway, "To hell with Ling. Let Sidlock keep him. We'll get married and raise almond-eyed Irishmen and have breakfast in our jammies every morning."

She smiled at me. She was scared and tired, but she smiled.

"Hi, Chick. I'll save the thanks for what you're doing because you don't like sentiment. Sit down, this is almost ready. I didn't know you even *owned* pajamas."

I took a sip of the coffee and crunched on the toast. "I usually save them for when I'm sick. I was trained that way. My mother used to like to impress doctors. I won't wear them when we're hitched. Only to breakfast with the kids. Modesty will prevail in the Kelly home."

She was putting the eggs and bacon in front of me and I could see tears welling up. "Sit down, Debby, before you fall down. We'll get Ling out."

She sat opposite me and squeezed her tear ducts with her hands in a praying position. "Chick, what am I going to do with him? This is the third time you've bailed him out of a gambling mess."

"When we get him out of this one, Deb, he's going to Gamblers Anonymous or I'll strangle him. It's a disease. Now let's not worry about it. It's in the bag."

I sure am great at bucking up other people, but I'm a failure in the Chick Kelly category. I felt like I was carrying a bag of rocks on my back when Mario picked me up at ten. Guido and Cuz and

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Barry were with him in the limo. I didn't want to talk to anybody, and I wished I had brought the magazine section of *The Times*.

Jack McCarthy was with one of Sidlock's goons picking up the referee. The swell was to be chosen at random by the first person to buy a ticket for the nine o'clock Scarsdale train at Grand Central Station.

The neutral ground was as neutral as you could get. A three-room suite at the Waldorf was selected, and neither side could have more than four aides with him.

Jack was already there when we entered. So was Sam and four secretaries. The seventh guy was Jay Porter Pemberton, and he looked it—riding breeches, turtleneck, and blazer. He was a Wall Street cat and delighted to be there.

"I was just telling these fellows that this is quite an experience, Mr. Kelly. I'm delighted to meet you. Yes, this is *quite* an experience."

He got a triple-A rating in redundancy, but he looked straight. They snagged him at his Fifth Avenue apartment just as he was setting out for his morning canter or trot, or whatever these guys do.

Pemberton said, "Well, as I understand the rules, gentlemen, Mr. Kelly picks the game and Mr. Sidlock picks Mr. Kelly's opponent. Shall we start?"

I'll say this for Jay Porter Pemberton: he's organized.

"What's your poison, Chick?" Sam says. "Name your game and win your fame."

He's a little too cocky, but it's show-and-tell time. "Well, I could pick a lot of things, Sam. Like bezique."

No stunned look. No "huh" or "what's that?" Not even mild surprise, yet.

"Okay, Chick." Sidlock's got a smirk on his puss as wide as Long Island. "Rubicon, or Six Pack, or do you call it Chinese bezique?"

I looked at Guido and told myself, "Goodbye, club." Also goodbye, Chick. Also goodbye, Ling.

So I get on the think. Hell, you can't lay down, baby. In my head the ideas are flowing like Niagara. Then I hit it. It's a chance, but a fair one.

"Sam, I said I *could* pick bezique. But I'm not. I'm sure you planned on my picking Scrabble. You're that thorough."

"If you want to play Scrabble, Chick, I'm ready."

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"I'm sure you sent your boys up to Connecticut and had them dig up Noah Webster. But we're not playing Scrabble, Sam. We're playing Sunday *Times* crossword puzzle."

That threw him.

"Wait a minute," he growled. "You said a game of chance, Kelly. Crossword puzzles aren't chance."

"I said chance or skill, and I can make it a game. All we do is draw a line down the center of two copies of the puzzle. I take one side, your guy takes the other. He uses a red pencil, I use a blue. I fill in my side, he fills in the other."

"Well, Mr. Kelly," our easy-rider referee says, "some of the blanks go across the whole puzzle."

"Right you are, Jay Porter, old man. We put a time limit on the independent puzzling. You set the time. Then we switch puzzles. And then each opponent fills in the other's side as best he can. At the end of another time period you tally up the blue squares and the red squares. The one with the most filled-in, correct squares wins."

"By God, that *is* interesting, Mr. Kelly! Well, Mr. Sidlock?"

"Hold on, Ref. This guy had a copy of *The Times* last night. He could have done the puzzle already."

"So did you, Sid," I said.

Jay Porter Pemberton stood straight in his riding boots. "Excellent. I declare a contest, gentlemen. Your champion, Mr. Sidlock? Let's away."

The Easy Rider sent Guido and one of Sidlock's guys down to the lobby for a couple of copies of *The Times*, and he was very judicious in determining the center line of the puzzles and setting the time periods for the independent and switch periods. And then we began . . .

Sammy the Cluck had to use his Scrabble expert. He sure could spell, but crosswords take more than that. I beat him by 29 squares.

Jay Porter Pemberton came along with us to a garage on West 19th Street where the goons transferred Ling to me. To make sure Ling didn't bump into a crap game along the way, we all escorted him home. Debby was mad as hell at him, but then it was kisses-and-tears time.

I was for getting right out of there, but Debby wouldn't hear of it. She had prepared a victory dinner. It was more like a Manda-

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rin's wedding feast, from winter melon soup to Peiching Kaoya. I noted that Jay Porter not only rides a horse, he eats like one.

"You know, Mr. Kelly," he said, taking another portion of sea scallops and pork kidneys, "you are a very resourceful fellow. I *sensed* that you actually came there to play bezique, and then changed your battle plan."

Jack Mac is beaming. "He's a champ, Mr. Pemberton, a jewel of a champ."

"We were just lucky the idea popped into my head," I said, getting up and going to Debby's kitchen to escape the hero worship.

Debby was stir-frying the next course in a wok.

"You amaze me, Deb. How did you put this all together so fast? I called you from the hotel at three o'clock with the news that we had won, and you had a feast ready at four. The marriage offer is still open."

"I might accept it someday, but don't give me any compliments, Chick. I had all day to cook."

"That's what I like, a confident lady."

"Chick, I'll never tell Ling—let him think he came that close to losing his life. It might cure him."

"Never tell him what?"

"When I was making your bed this morning I found the crossword puzzle with a line down the center. Twenty-three across isn't 'appeals,' it's 'applies,' by the way."

All right, folks, I'm not a hero. There's an ancient saying in my family that goes: Never give a hood an even break. Or, as my Uncle Din says, "All's fair in love and war and Manhattan." Deal 'em, Chick!

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a *NEW* short story by

LAWRENCE TREAT

Stories about blackmail are not rare, but also they are not run-of-the-mill. In this unusual story Andrew Willis, a real pro in the fine art of extortion, is approaching the highpoint of his criminal career—cashing in on a scandal involving the wife of the governor of the state . . .

MOMENT OF TRUTH

by LAWRENCE TREAT

Andrew Willis, to use his current alias, had never been in jail and never expected to be. He picked his victims carefully, with an unerring instinct for what they'd pay without making a fuss. Besides, they liked him; they fell for his easy manner and good-looking masculinity, and they had no desire to harm him. Elderly women, widows without experience in the hard world of reality—if he left them with a little less money, they had their fond memories as a souvenir, as a kind of booby prize. In a way he was doing them a favor. But this time—the governor's wife?

He'd seen her picture in the papers. She was always in the background, the perfect helpmate to her husband. Willis could visualize her gracing the governor's mansion, presiding over a tea, emanating charm, and talking easily on noncontroversial topics.

Willis could have made his move earlier—say, six months ago when he first found out—but he'd waited. Harold Paxton had squeaked in as governor four years ago, and his re-election campaign was going to be difficult. A breath of scandal might ruin him—so how much was a breath of scandal worth?

Willis had it figured out in his own mind, the day he phoned the executive mansion and said he'd like to speak to Mrs. Paxton. Something personal, he said. He was an old friend whom she'd be glad to hear from.

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She wasn't exactly glad, but she listened to what he had to say.

"Never mind how I found out," he said. "The point is that I did, and I'd like to talk it over with you."

"Talk what over?"

"Marcia Crane," he said.

There was a long pause. He could barely hear her quick intake of breath before she said, very slowly, "Yes. I did know a Marcia Crane once. What about her?"

"I thought we might reminisce," he said.

"I—I'd be glad to."

"Fifty-four South Mews," he said. "Ground floor. Sometime tomorrow?"

"I'll try," she said.

"That's not enough."

"I have such a busy schedule, but I guess I can fit it in. I think—maybe between three and four?"

"It will be a pleasure," he said. And it was.

He'd rented the one-room efficiency apartment for the month. It was furnished tastefully, it suggested a well-established status—nothing small-time about him. And he, sitting in the comfortable chair placed at just the right angle so that he could see through the slit in the curtain, saw her walk quickly into the small cement-paved yard in front of his door. There she hesitated, opened her bag, gave a touch of makeup to her lips, smoothed back her hair, then stepped out of sight.

She rang the bell timidly, just a light nervous touch. Then, obviously steeling herself, she gave the button a long determined push. He got up and opened the door.

None of the pictures he'd seen had done justice to her. The newspaper reproductions showed an attractive enough woman, but the person who stood in front of him was unusual. Although her oval face was a trifle drawn, it was classic in its modeling, and its beauty was enhanced by her gray eyes that were large and lustrous with both the fear and the courage that had driven her here.

"Mrs. Paxton?" he said.

She nodded and slipped through the door sideways, making herself small, as if somehow that would protect her.

"Sit down, won't you?" Willis said. "There's no reason to be nervous."

"Yes," she said, in a faint voice.

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"Your jacket—don't you want to take it off?"

"No—please."

"I want you to feel at home," he said. His voice, deep, firm, reassuring, made her fear seem needless. "Think of me as a friend," he added. "Someone who'd like to talk over old times."

"What do you know about Marcia Crane?" she asked abruptly.

"Well, first of all I know she's beautiful. Far more so than I'd expected."

"What else?" she demanded, and she seemed more confident, as if she was beginning to suspect that he was bluffing.

He disillusioned her at once. "I know that Marcia Crane was convicted of grand larceny, second degree, and was given a suspended sentence. I have a copy of the record. Furthermore, I know that shortly afterwards she changed her name to Marcia Crandall, and that four years later she married Harold Paxton, who is now governor of this state and facing a tough political campaign."

"How did you find out all this?"

"From a friend of mine. In my business it's important to have friends who pick up information that might be mutually useful."

"And what *is* your business?" she asked.

"Please, Mrs. Paxton, let's not fence with each other. As I said before, let's talk like old friends."

"And what do old friends talk about?"

"Various things. Money, for instance."

"How much?"

"I'm in no particular need. Still, I might want you to lend me a little something, for old times' sake, and you might feel I was a good friend in not talking to your husband."

"Harold knows everything you've told me. We don't hide things from each other. If you doubt it, I can arrange for you to speak to him on his private line."

"No need," he said. "I believe you."

She blinked, glanced at her wrist watch. "Mr. Willis, it would be nice to sit here and chat." She almost spat out the last word—there was nothing meek or scared about her now. "But I have things to do, so tell me what you want."

"The first thing I want," he said, "is to make sure you don't have a mike hidden on you. I don't intend to frisk you, I'm sure you wouldn't stand for it, so I'd suggest you go into the bathroom and disrobe, and then hand me all your clothes so that I can examine them. Including your watch."

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She stood up. "How," she said, "can you be sure I won't keep something in the bathroom?"

"I trust you," he said, smiling.

Her eyes, lustrous as a pair of enormous pearls, gazed at him strangely, as if she didn't understand him. Then she stood up and walked into the bathroom. Three minutes later she handed him her clothes. He looked them over carefully, although he'd been certain from the beginning that she wasn't wired. She was too innocent to think of anything like that. And if she'd consulted anyone, the police or Paxton's bodyguard, they'd have warned her not to risk it. Just find out what the guy wants, they'd have told her. He'll ask for another meeting, he'll make his demands the first time, not much more, and he'll be cagey about them. The second time around is the time to take him.

When she emerged fully dressed, Willis put on the charm. "Sorry to bother you," he said, smiling. "You look lovely. I hate to bring anything crass into this, but if you could see your way to bringing me that little gift, say a week from today, around the same time—"

"How much?" she asked.

He shrugged. "That," he said, "I leave to your discretion. In fact, what I really look forward to is the pleasure of your company."

She smiled back then, and he felt that he'd finally broken down some main wall of resistance and that from now on he'd have no real trouble with her. And after all, he was Andrew Willis and women fell for him. All of them, including the governor's wife.

She left as she had come, timidly, afraid that she'd be recognized. As for Willis, the moment she'd gone he went into the bathroom and retrieved the camera he'd hidden in the two-way mirror of the medicine cabinet, and which he'd actuated by remote control. He spent the afternoon and evening developing the film.

She came again the following week, at the same time of day, and again she hesitated outside, gave herself a few moments to primp, and again she barely touched the doorbell, as if she was too shy to more than brush it with her fingertips. And again, after a few moments, she gave it a firm confident push.

When he opened the door for her he could tell she was frightened and she felt she was facing an ordeal.

"I knew it was you," he said pleasantly. "One short, one long Our secret ring."

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"If you think so," she murmured in a low voice as she slid past him.

"Your wrap?" he said.

She didn't answer, but a small frown puckered her face and she appeared to lean toward him. He caressed her shoulders lightly as he removed her light cape. Progress, he told himself. She was beginning to fall for him, and he wondered if there was an affair ahead of him, besides a substantial sum of money. Still, this wasn't the time to push romantic matters. Business first.

She sat down in the wooden chair and opened her purse. "I brought you something," she said nervously. "You said you wanted—"

"Oh, no," he said, interrupting, guarding himself against the possibility that the conversation was being taped. "I didn't say I wanted anything. I made no demands. And you didn't have to come. You came of your own free will, didn't you?"

Instead of answering she took a sheaf of bills from her purse and put it on the table next to her. Her brows lifted up questioningly, but she still refrained from speaking.

"You seem scared," he said.

"Of you?"

"Well, there's nobody else around, is there?"

"I hope not," she said. "And, please—I'd like to go now. I have an appointment—I'm due at a tea, a political tea, with my husband."

"They'll wait," Willis said. With his eye he measured the thickness of the currency she'd put on the table. The visible bill was a century note. So—a grand altogether? Two grand? He amused himself guessing, while he spoke.

"Marcia," he said, "I've been thinking about you and I keep wondering how a girl like you ever got into such a mess. You're not the type, and you've had no trouble since. Think of me as a psychiatrist who's interested in helping you. Tell me how it happened—that's the only way you can straighten things out for yourself."

"I don't think I need straightening out," she said.

He chuckled. "Oh, Marcia, we all do, every one of us. That's why psychiatrists like myself are so important, and why we charge so much for a consultation. So now that's settled, tell me the whole story. How it happened, why you did it. After I have the facts I'll try making a diagnosis."

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"Psychiatrist?" she said. "Can't we be a little more honest? Do we have to pretend?"

"Just tell me how it happened."

She touched the money lightly, leaned back. Her eyes narrowed; the softness in them seemed to roll up inside the shade of her lids, and her pupils darkened.

"I haven't thought of it in years," she said. "It was such a stupid thing to do. Unutterably, inconceivably stupid. My family had plenty of money, they were moral, probably too much so—maybe that's why I took the risk. It was a kind of rebellion. But you want to know what happened, don't you?"

Willis nodded. "From your own lips."

"Yes," she said. "It was really a prank. The gang I was going with, they weren't very different from any other group of well-to-do, spoiled kids. We had parties, we smoked pot, we even tried hashish. We dared each other to do things, crazy things, just for the fun and glamor of it. And at one of the parties a couple of the kids happened to mention how easy it was to pick up things in a department store and walk out with them. Just for kicks. And somebody told the story of how a couple of college boys went into the sporting goods department of a big store, picked up a canoe, carried it out, and nobody stopped them. They just walked outside, put it down on the pavement, and left. And it all sounded like so much fun."

Her fingers played nervously with the bills, fanning them out. Willis, watching closely, could see two more century notes and a ten underneath. Not more than a thousand, he told himself.

"Then somebody," she said, "suggested a kind of contest to see who could get away with the most loot in one week. It sounded exciting, and we made up rules. What we picked up had to be taken in one visit. We'd meet again in a week, we'd all bring whatever we had, then we'd take it somewhere and phone the newspapers and tell them where everything was, and that the stores could have it all back. Fun!"

Kids, Willis told himself, doing it for kicks. And he thought of all the times he'd stolen what he needed, and of all the ruses he'd invented for going into a good restaurant, ordering a meal, and not paying for it.

"I wanted to win," she said. "I went into a jewelry store first and looked at rings, but jewelers are careful, they have to be, and I realized I had no chance of stealing and getting away with it. So

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I didn't even try, but I got into a conversation with the salesman and he told me some of the tricks. He took me for a poor little innocent, and I guess I was.

"The next time I did it for real. I went into LeMans, the furrier, and looked at stoles and muffs and coats, expensive ones, and I ordered some under a made-up name to be sent to a made-up address. I was building up a character. A front, you could call it."

"Good technique," Willis said. "Where did you learn all this?"

"Partly from the jewelry salesman, but it's just common sense, isn't it? You don't walk into a high-class store, pick something up, and go out with it. You have to seem respectable."

"Which you are."

She shrugged. "After I'd pretended to make those purchases the rest was easy. I left my own coat on a chair, tried on a beautiful chinchilla, and walked around the store with it, as if I was trying it on, or modeling it. Then I simply walked out with it."

"And?"

"Into the arms of the doorman, who was the security officer, too. He took me upstairs to the manager. That's all."

"But why did he prosecute? You must have told your story. You were from a good family, your parents would vouch for you, the store hadn't lost anything. Why did they prosecute?"

"The doorman propositioned me," Marcia said. "He said I could go free, if. I got angry at him and screamed bloody murder. A couple of clerks heard the fuss I was making and after that they had to prosecute." She put her hands to her face. "I haven't thought about it in years. It—it was all so stupid!"

She was close to sobbing, and Willis told himself that now was the time he could put his arms around her and tell her not to cry. Except that he wanted her to cry, wanted her to hate herself, to feel she had to pay for her mistake. And pay in good solid cash. More, much more than this measly sheaf of bills on the table next to her.

"I think I'm beginning to understand," he said. "You told me that your husband knows all this?"

"Of course. I couldn't conceal anything as important as that. We don't lie to each other."

"What would your husband think if the story came out? In the papers. Now."

She shook her head wearily and pointed to the money. "He'd pay."

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Something in the way she spoke seemed to warn Willis. He'd been careful enough; he was quite aware that the governor of a state has a lot more power than any ordinary individual, and that if he, Willis, made one false move, he'd be caught and squashed like a bug seen crawling along a pure white wall. Instinctively he decided that ordinary caution wasn't enough, that the situation called for something extraordinary, a more involved plan, a more intricate protective system.

"I'll have to think over what you told me," Willis said, reverting to his role of psychiatrist. "Meanwhile, better go on to your appointment."

"Yes," she said, standing up. But she drooped, as if the memory of what she'd done so long ago still oppressed her, as if she faced a danger far greater than she'd previously realized.

He walked over to the door. "Next week, same time," he said. She barely acknowledged his words as she left.

Alone, he stared at the bills, but he did not pick them up and count them. He felt he'd made progress, but not to the extent he should have. He hadn't mishandled her, and yet he sensed that he'd mishandled the whole situation and exposed himself to unnecessary risks. His instinct told him to change his tactics and go beyond Marcia. He had to put the forces behind her on the defensive.

Thus far there was no evidence on which a criminal charge could be based. He'd made no threats, no demands. She'd come to his bachelor quarters twice, and stayed for an hour or so. He had a collection of pictures of her in the nude. Add it up, and he held all the aces and all the kings. The question was how best to use what he had.

Still not counting the money, he put it in an envelope which he left on the end table next to the chair where she'd been sitting. Then he went out.

After a block or so he suspected he was being followed. After a half-dozen blocks he was certain of it. And with that knowledge any softness or sympathy he might have had for her vanished. A kid like her, brought up in luxury, getting away with a suspended sentence on an open-and-shut case of grand larceny, then marrying the governor of the state and now using her power and influence to trap him, Willis. He'd show her. He'd bring her to her knees and make her pay. She was, he told himself confidently, going to support him for the rest of his life.

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He made no attempt to elude his shadower. In fact, he made it easy and walked slowly, waiting patiently for traffic lights and trying not to lose himself in the crowd when he entered the department store.

He stopped at the cosmetic counter and bought an expensive perfume, which he asked to have gift-wrapped and sent to his address. Then he went to the Sleep Shop and bought a black lace nightgown, which he also had sent to his address. He refrained from opening a charge account, since it might have involved him in making fraudulent statements. He paid cash for both purchases.

When he returned to his apartment he was again tailed, and it was clear to him that from now on every movement he made would be watched. In a way he was pleased. He had a bodyguard, he was safe from muggers and holdup men. His only problem was to dispose of Marcia's money, which he now suspected was marked.

He stared at the envelope in which he'd put it. He could burn it, but what would that accomplish? He had to convince them he was no ordinary blackmailer and couldn't be tricked, trapped, or outwitted, and that a few thousand dollars was peanuts to him and not worth bothering with. That was the message he had to put across.

After a few minutes his face broke into a smile. He pocketed the envelope, let himself out into the apartment hallway, and went up the stairway to the roof. There he crossed over as far as the corner building, where he lifted the skylight, climbed down the short ladder, and descended to the ground floor. After carefully scanning the street he slipped out and waited for a cab.

He ordered the driver to go north and after ten minutes of maneuvering Willis was convinced he wasn't being followed. He paid off the cab, found the nearest police station, walked up to the desk, and handed in the envelope.

"This was dropped on the street," he said. "I just happened to see a woman step into a limousine and saw her bag get caught on the edge of the door and the envelope drop out. The car went off before I could yell or anything, so I picked this up and brought it in here. There's money inside, but I haven't counted it."

The deskman opened the envelope and spread the bills out in front of him. "One thousand exact," he said. "Can you identify the car?"

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"I saw the license plate. It was Number One."

"Huh? That's the governor's car."

"Seems so," Willis remarked.

The deskman, guessing something unusual was up, spoke crisply. "What's your name?"

"Never mind that. A lady dropped something. I picked it up, and all I want is to make sure she gets it back."

"You want a reward, don't you?"

"No. Let's just say I like to do favors for people."

"Then do me the favor of identifying yourself," the deskman said, with heavy sarcasm.

"I've done nothing wrong. I've violated no law. I found some money and turned it in. That's all." And Willis walked out.

His shadow, standing across the street from Number Fifty-four South Mews, looked surprised when Willis returned. Willis grinned at him and waved. The next day Willis read that the governor's wife had lost some money on the street and that an anonymous Diogenes had turned it in at the Ninth Precinct.

The deskman had no idea who the man was. "He looked well-heeled," the officer said. "And some people, they just don't like publicity." Which, Willis told himself, was an accurate statement.

He was circumspect all week long. Although his cash was giving out, he did nothing to replenish it. At the end of the week he expected to become a wealthy man, secure, respected, and beyond reproach.

Marcia Paxton arrived at the usual time, and in the same way. She waited outside while she made up her face, and she pressed the bell twice, one short and one long, and slipped in shyly, as she previously did. She was wearing the same light cape, and she slipped it off her shoulders and handed it to him.

"Nice to see you," he said. "Sit down?"

She remained standing. "I've been thinking of you all week," she said.

"Nice thoughts?"

"I kept wondering why you returned my money."

"I don't like to accept gifts from women. I'm not the type."

"Really? Then I've misjudged you."

"Well, it did cross my mind that the money might be marked. Or that you'd copied down the serial numbers."

"Why would I do that?"

"Under the mistaken impression that I was trying to blackmail

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you. Which I'm not. But I've been thinking, Marcia. According to the polls, Harold Paxton is going to win the election by a narrow margin—unless, of course, something happens."

"What could happen?"

"Nothing much," Willis said. "But he's in the position of being able to give a friend of his, or of yours, a nice easy job. Say, something at a salary of fifty thousand a year. I've always wanted security."

"Why would the governor hire you?"

"Because his wife would insist on it. Because—well, take a look at these. Your story about getting caught in a youthful escapade might not hurt him too much, but this is different." And he handed her the nude pictures he'd taken in the bathroom at the time of her first visit.

After a quick surprise she studied the photographs carefully. "I hadn't thought of that," she said. "From the angle I'd say the camera must have been fairly high up. As high, for instance, as the medicine cabinet?"

"Or as high as if I was holding a camera at chest level, while you—"

"While I what?" she said.

"Marcia," he said, "I think we've arrived at what is commonly called the moment of truth. It seems that several police officers have been stationed near here and have seen you visit me regularly, once a week, and stay in this little love nest for an hour or so. The pictures—and I have the negatives hidden in a safe place, you may be sure—are convincing evidence of why you came here. So—do I get the job?"

She smiled quietly. "Job?" she said. "Just who do you think I am, that I have so much power?"

"Mrs. Harold Paxton," he said. "Wife of a man in a political campaign that would end in disaster if his beloved wife turned out to be having an affair with—well, call me whatever you want."

"I think I'll call you an extortionist," she said. "And a rather clever one."

"Much too clever for you. Marcia, you played around with larceny some years ago, and you got stung. This time you played around with a pro, and you got stung much worse. And so, Mrs. Marcia Paxton—"

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," she said, interrupting. "Mrs. Pax-

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ton sent me here in her place, after your first phone call, but I only came in the line of duty. I look a lot like her, don't I? Now, if you want my identification—"

And from her bag she took out her police badge and identification card, and then her gun. She held it in a line with her chest, and her hand was steady.

"Understand?" she said.

He nodded slowly. He understood perfectly.

NEXT MONTH . . .

14 *new* stories — including

JOHN BALL *(first Virgil Tibbs short story)*

HUGH PENTECOST *(beginning a new series)*

EDWARD D. HOCH *(about Interpol)*

JACOB HAY *(about Wracke & Rhuewin)*

NEDRA TYRE *(about a strange pet)*

S. S. RAFFERTY *(Captain Cork in Georgia)*

and our new feature—

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

QUIZ: Are you an Agatha Christie aficionado? Then name Hercule Poirot's manservant. Give up? The answer can be found in *Hallowe'en Party* (Pocket Books, 95¢). It can also be found in the recently published *Andy East's Agatha Christie Quiz Book* (Drake, $6.95), the perfect train/plane-ride book, filled with about 300 tricky teasers designed to challenge and confound the Marple maniac, the passionate Poirot peruser, and the confirmed Christie consumer, as well as the more casual reader. (The answer to the question above is at the end of this column.)

TOUGH: There are reports (*very* unconfirmed by E. P. Dutton, his regular publisher) that Mickey Spillane has decided to write no more detective stories. There are two completed manuscripts in the hands of his editor, however—both hardboiled mysteries. His previous two books are still selling so well that no one is in a hurry to get the new ones on the market. Tentative titles for the final Spillane mysteries are *The Double* and *Complex 90.* All his books are still in print and probably nobody (including Spillane) knows how many millions he's earned from them. "But I can write a check," he says, "and it doesn't bounce."

PLAYING CRICKET: Graham Greene, well known for his brooding "entertainments" (as he prefers to call his mystery/crime novels) with religious undercurrents, has turned his considerable talent to writing a play about the greatest jewel thief of all, A. J. Raffles. Greene's original story is a comedy and will be produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London this winter. Also, England's perpetual television export, *Masterpiece Theatre,* has plans to produce a Raffles program as, thankfully, a melodrama. E. W. Hornung started it all and Barry Perowne has kept alive the skills of the amateur cracksman and gentleman cricketer.

HORROR: Nicholas Meyer's new book won't be called *The Eight-Per-Cent Solution* after all;

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it is scheduled for May publication as *The West End Horror*. In addition to a beleaguered Holmes, it features Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Ellen Terry, and others.

HISS: The Napoleon of Crime returns in John Gardner's *The Revenge of Moriarty* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, $8.95), the second volume in the most commendable trilogy of the decade. Gardner's Boysie Oakes books are something, but these tales of Professor Moriarty are something else.

CURTAIN: Hercule Poirot's manservant is Evelyn Hope.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

It is a rainy winter morning at the quiet New York brownstone with the nameplate "American Literary Historical Society," actually a CIA front where a small research staff sifts through popular fiction and periodicals. Outside, a freelance killer (Max von Sydow) awaits the moment when all are at work to enter and begin a tour of assassination.

Robert Redford is the horrified CIA reader who by accident escapes the carnage which opens *Three Days of the Condor* (Paramount). For the rest of the film, at first dazed and then with considerable cunning, he outmaneuvers the traps which a bizarre rift in the intelligence "community" has set up around him.

When his own section chief, flown up from Washington to see him "safely home," starts shooting at him, Redford protests weakly, "I'm not a field agent! I just *read books!*" He dives underground, drafting as he does (in one of several Hitchcockian touches) a woman photographer whom he kidnaps almost at random to help him. His CIA code name is Condor and in a good film of suspense and pursuit he, like the bird, becomes a very endangered species.

Director Sydney Pollack has tried to portray a post-Watergate climate of national distrust, somewhat altering the incidents and title of James Grady's novel *Six Days of the Condor*. The computerized labyrinths of the "suspicion business" seem, in view of the headlines, to be less and less like fiction.

The Wilby Conspiracy (United Artists) is a drama of apartheid and police pursuit against South African landscapes in which Nicol Williamson as the relentless stalker is superb. Michael Caine and Sidney Poitier are his prey.

Political assassination is the theme of both *Hennessy* (American International), wherein IRA-man Rod Steiger is predictably

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stopped in his attempt to bomb the Queen of England; and *Russian Roulette* (Avco), a complex, none-too-rational but quite suspenseful yarn in which Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman George Segal circumvents the dynamiting of the Russian premier on a visit to Vancouver. In this variant of *Day of the Jackal,* the villains are dissident KGB; the film based on the book by Tom Ardies.

Much more quietly, Claude Chabrol's *Just Before Nightfall* is a gripping study of the aftermath of a man's murder of his mistress. Like all this French director's work, the film is all surface calm and shudder underneath.

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INTERVIEW: ROSS MACDONALD

Lew Archer has appeared in 18 novels, one novelette, nine short stories, a television movie and series, and two popular motion pictures. Ross Macdonald, who writes the adventures of the sensitive, good-hearted private eye, has some surprising things to say about him.

EQMM: Who is Lew Archer and where did he come from?

MACDONALD: Well, in some ways he is me. As I've said before, I'm not Archer, exactly, but Archer is me. That is, his points of view and reactions are more or less mine. There is no point in writing about a character, a central character, unless he reflects the author's philosophy.

EQMM: Is the detective who appears in films under the name "Harper" an accurate portrayal of the "Archer" who appears in your fiction?

MACDONALD: Harper is not an *inaccurate* portrayal of Archer. He is a totally separate character who is derived from Archer. They are actually quite different. The film character Harper makes more wisecracks and is more of an adventure hero. The literary character Archer is more introspective and philosophical. The films are more entertainment, while the books are more art. Of course, all writers of detective fiction try to bridge that gap and make their art as entertaining as they can.

EQMM: Does Paul Newman, who played Harper in both *Harper* and *The Drowning Pool,* fit your mental image of Archer?

MACDONALD: I've never had a mental image of Archer. I don't know what he looks like, but it doesn't make any difference. He was created from the inside out, and it's what he thinks, what he does, that are important. But Newman was an excellent choice to play Harper—he has so much vitality, so much flair. And he is a good physical representation of what Archer *could* look like. Brian Keith, by the way, who starred in

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the television series, is also a good physical depiction of Archer, although he is very different from Newman.

EQMM: Will there be other Archer, or Harper, films?

MACDONALD: There will be further films, but I don't know under what name. Warner Brothers owns the name "Harper," so no one else can use it. I'm working on the treatment now for the next film, which will be *The Instant Enemy*. My new novel, *The Silent Hammer,* has just gone in to my publisher.

THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Whatever may be my complaints about items arriving for review, our new books seldom lack variety. In January, to celebrate the new year, I can offer you this choice mixed bag: each hardcover, each hypnotic, ranging from a three-volume single-author omnibus to a really memorable crime anthology, with stops between them for one novel of detection and one of espionage.

The Charlotte Armstrong Festival, by that late brilliant lady (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, $8.95), comprises three romances in which Miss Armstrong has so well shown her dexterity at what might be called the emotional thriller.

Whether you begin with "The Gift Shop," "Lemon in the Basket," or "The Balloon Man," you will find her sympathetic protagonist enmeshed in mystery or dilemma which grows ever more tense until our hostess restores clarity with some ingenious touch at the finale.

If feminine coyness sometimes intrudes, it never diminishes humor, perception, or impact. My own favorite would be "The Gift Shop," wherein Harry Fairchild and his faithful Jean search abroad as well as at home for the secret of a toy pig at Los Angeles Airport. But I should not contest some other view. As connoisseurs, *mes enfants,* you will want to try them all.

With Jack Fenner, Boston private investigator of George Harmon Coxe's *No Place for Murder* (Knopf, $6.95), we plunge at once into more fictional dirty work than that sedate town has known since Jacques Futrelle created the Thinking Machine.

First Fenner must prove he didn't kill the unknown man found shot in his office. By tracing that victim, dubious both past and present, they uncover evidence of large-scale jugglery in stock certificates. This may or may not involve Bruce Townsend, Brahmin stockbroker, who has lost his head over a would-be actress.

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Lieutenant Bacon, though less cooperative than some policemen, at least won't impede Fenner as our hero scurries to investigate.

It's a broad field. Honest or otherwise, Bruce Townsend owes Maurie Matlock thirty thousand from one ill-judged bet; Maurie's hoods are closing in. Do you understand the meaning of "vigorish"?

Despite so many suspects, Fenner hits on truth through various clues and traps the murderer before another bullet can be fired, thus fittingly to conclude the latest detective story from an old pro whose hand has not lost its cunning in forty years.

The first assignment for James Hagen, alert CIA trainee who narrates *Pay on the Way Out,* by John Murphy (Scribners, $6.95), is to make a field evaluation of three widely separated murders —the Spanish toreador shot during a bullfight, the London journalist knifed in his mews cottage, the CIA official killed by explosive at Arlington, Virginia—when there may well be some undercover link between them.

This link between them proves more than casual. Hagen, whose fluent Spanish eases his task, begins to interpret the connection from certain photographs taken during the famous San Firmin fiesta at Pamplona.

Though we meet the most modern espionage, involving France as well as Russia, beneath outward chicanery seethes another lethal intrigue. Its trail carries Hagen from Spain to England and then back to Spain for a showdown.

Showdown with death? Menaced by more than one secret enemy, he escapes through the intervention of Marian Chelt, the English girl who has followed him. If at first glance the enemy seems to win and wax fat, it's sheer illusion. The author feels as sympathetic towards Jim Hagen as you yourself will feel; be sure that villainy gets its comeuppance, and bad guys pay on the way out.

Open at Your Own Risk, edited by Joan Kahn (Houghton Mifflin, $12.95), provides a beautifully mixed bag of chills or thrills, fiction and fact, for her seventh distinguished anthology.

With unerring eye Miss Kahn has sought more obscure material in search of novelty. Many titles will be unfamiliar; even your obedient servant failed to identify a few. Though W. F. Harvey's "The Beast with Five Fingers" has long been my favorite ghost story, and the trial of Elvira Barney made criminal history at the Old Bailey, I never encountered any experiment in grisliness by W. W. Jacobs except "The Monkey's Paw."

Apart from a Wodehouse caper, doubtless included for contrast, there's crime or diabolism to suit every taste. Dip in anywhere, but expect only the unexpected, which after all is an even more pleasant form of risk.

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

HARMATTAN. A Novel of Suspense by Thomas Klop. Bobbs-Merrill, $7.95

Nick Blane arrives in Nigeria, searching for his nephew who was thrown out of the Peace Corps and is now missing. It's the time of Harmattan, the hot, dry wind that binds the country in famine, drought and political ferment. In this skillful novel Blane meets a series of odd and menacing characters, as he's shot at, narrowly misses being run over, pursued by the cops, harassed at every turn. When Blane finds his nephew, it's too late. There's no way out of the country and Nigerian Intelligence is closing in on them, in this thriller with authentic Nigerian setting.

THE BLACK TOWER, by P. D. James. Charles Scribner's Sons, $6.95

Scotland Yard's Adam Dalgliesh returns in "another of P. D. James' perfectly appointed and surpassingly interesting stories of life and death." *(The Kirkus Reviews)*

Dalgliesh travels to a remote part of the Dorset coast and is drawn into the orbit of a private nursing home where death strikes and strikes again.

Barbara Bannon wrote in *Publishers Weekly:* "This English mystery writer gets better with each book" and Dorothy B. Hughes says: "She *is* master of the felicitous turn of phrase, of the strange and sudden twist of thought, of the lucid and intelligent style.... That she has you on the edge of your chair, turning off your TV set... is pure velvet."

THE PIMLICO PLOT, by Mary McMullen. Doubleday & Co., Inc., $5.95

After a whirlwind courtship which left little time for particulars, Fenway Vaughan marries Maeve Devlin, a woman he knows very little about. Vaughan had hardly expected that a trip to London would uncover such a sinister past for his bride—all in the person of her ex-lover, mystery writer Desmond Byrne.

Slowly, Byrne begins a ghostly wooing aimed at reclaiming Mrs. Fenway Vaughan. Fact and fiction become intertwined as some of the grislier elements of Byrne's own plot begin to spill over into the realities of Maeve's life... this time in the form of political kidnappings by Irish nationalists.

PORTRAIT OF EMMA, by Lillian Cheatham. Doubleday & Co., Inc., $5.95

Seventeen year old Emma Ashton could not have dreamed of the changes the next seven years would have on her life. Her mother had died when Emma was twelve, from the same case of smallpox which had left Emma's face, and perhaps her spirit, permanently scarred. When her father commits suicide, Emma decides to strike out on her own and takes a position as a housekeeper for the widow Silence Southwick.

Emma's growing intimacy with this household of secrets and intrigues soon embroils her into a web of murder and suspected witchcraft, in which she discovers that she has unwittingly become the next victim.

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

PAPERBACK THRILLER, by Lynn Meyer. Random House, $6.95

A delightful detective heroine, Dr. Sarah Chayse—psychiatrist, liberated woman, vegetarian—makes her appearance in this witty, sophisticated mystery novel. A clue uncovered quite by accident, in the reading of a paperback thriller, sparks off a bizarre case involving medical ethics and murder. The heroine's resourcefulness, analytical mind, quiet determination, and sensible courage are a refreshing change from the tough, hard-boiled heroes of the genre.

"Fresh and unexpected . . . original, interesting, and suspenseful." —*Library Journal.*

"A very entertaining first mystery . . . good on suspense and wry humor."—*Publishers Weekly.*

"A catchy, sympathetic, stylish entertainment."—*Kirkus Reviews.*

BRESSIO, by Richard Sapir. Random House, $6.95

A strong, tough, unusual mystery novel with a great central character—Alphonse Joseph Bressio. His mother named him after Al Capone. And his mean, burly looks give him the appearance of a gangster. But Bressio is a solver of crimes, not a perpetrator, and he has the advantage of knowing everything there is to know about the underworld. This is a funny, sad novel about lawyers whose morals are no better than the clients they serve, about bribery and dope-dealing and plea-bargaining, where justice is traded like a used car, about the hope of the law and the reality of people.

Alfred Hitchcock presents STORIES TO BE READ WITH THE DOOR LOCKED, ed. by Alfred Hitchcock. Random House, $8.95

"Caution is the watchword," warns the Master of Suspense as he introduces this superb collection of twenty-six stories and four novelettes by today's top suspense authors—among them: Robert L. Fish, Roald Dahl, Harold Q. Masur, Bill Pronzini, Isaac Asimov, Joe Gores, Rex Stout. "So make sure the door is locked, then double-lock it, turn the page and start to read . . ."

"Another corpulent collection of detective and horror stories, most of them with a turnabout close. . . . All provide better than reliable entertainment."—*Kirkus Reviews.*

MY BROTHER'S KILLER, by Jean Potts. Charles Scribner's Sons, $6.95

An Edgar Award winner *(Go Lovely Rose)* has now written one of the finest crime novels of her distinguished career. Set in a New York brownstone, this is the story of a man's plan to murder his brother. Jean Potts explores Garth Sullivan's hatred of his brother as she follows, step by careful step, his brilliant murder plan and its outcome.

"Jean Potts has made a very successful specialty out of setting mystery novels against a homey, seemingly cozy family background that really masks oozing hatred. This is one of her best in some time . . . the suspense mounts steadily."—*Publishers Weekly.*

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EDWARD D. HOCH

Once again Dr. Sam Hawthorne, the rustic raconteur, now in his seventies and retired, looks into his memory book and recalls another "miracle problem"—this one the tale of a ghost who had good reason to haunt the bandstand in the village square. But—can a ghost commit murder in full view of hundreds of eyewitnesses? Yes, we said a ghost, a phantom out of the past . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE HAUNTED BANDSTAND

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Well now, I promised to tell you about the haunted bandstand, didn't I? You comfortable in that chair? Your glass filled? These aren't stories to listen to without—ah—a small libation. No, sir!

"This was still the summer of '24, shortly after I'd returned to Northmont from the wedding that involved me in the lobster shack affair. It was a healthy summer as summers go, and there wasn't too much call for my services. Nobody'd even missed us that day my nurse April and I were away, but that was prob'ly because folks were already gettin' ready for the big Fourth o' July celebration.

"You see, that's when it happened, with the bandstand and all. On the Fourth o' July . . ."

It came on a Friday that year (the old man went on), and it was a big treat for the folks 'round Northmont. 'Course there were no long weekends in those days. Most everyone worked at least a half day on Saturdays, but nobody ever worked very hard the day after the Fourth.

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About a week before the celebration I happened to meet Doc Henry Church, the local druggist, near the park in the town square. Doc Church was always friendly to me, prob'ly 'cause I sent him most of his business. This was in the days before drug stores started sellin' everything from perfume to picnic grills. Doc Church sold drugs an' tobacco, an' he had a soda fountain—but that was all.

"Big doings here next week, Dr. Sam. You comin' to the band concert an' fireworks?"

"I wouldn't miss it, Henry. This is my third summer in Northmont, and the Fourth of July is one of the highspots."

He was a smiling man of medium build, around 40, who lived in the town with his wife and two children. I liked Doc Church, even though he was forever kiddin' me about bein' a young available bachelor. "Thought a fella like you would have more important things to do on a summer's night than listen to me playin' the flute in the town band," he chided.

"That's a pretty important thing," I answered with a wink. "All the young girls will be there."

We'd strolled together into the park and now we reached the old bandstand. It was a tall wooden structure, well weathered and in need of repainting, with eight open sides and a roof that tapered to a point with a weathervane atop it. The floor was maybe four feet off the ground and was reached by seven steps that led up from the ground. There were railings along the steps, and railings enclosin' the other sides of the bandstand, prob'ly to keep overzealous trumpeters from topplin' backwards into the crowd. The space beneath the bandstand was completely enclosed with wooden latticework, guarding against wanderin' children.

"Sheriff Lens ever tell you about the ghost?" Doc Church asked.

"Here? By the bandstand?"

"Yes. Happened back around 1880, right after this bandstand was built."

"What happened?"

"Couple o' drifters—a colored man an' his gypsy wife—come to town. He was prob'ly a freed slave who'd been roaming the country since the Civil War, but nobody knowed for sure. One night he broke into the hardware store and they caught him. They said he had a knife a foot long and he near killed the sheriff. I guess the townsfolk weren't takin' any chances. They strung him up from the top o' the bandstand."

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"Lynched him?" I was incredulous. "Lynchings didn't happen in New England."

"They was rare, but they happened. Indians in colonial days, an' witches, too—in Salem. Anyway, his gypsy wife put a curse on the bandstand before they drove her out o' town, and they say he still comes back here at times, still wearin' a hood an' the rope 'round his neck."

"Sounds like an old wives' tale to me."

"I'll admit he hasn't been seen in recent years," Doc Church conceded.

"I'll bet not! People today are too smart for that nonsense."

"I s'pose you're right," he agreed as we headed back.

"Mayor Dwiggins return from Washington yet?"

"Just this mornin'. Came in to get his prescription refilled. He says Washington is hot an' full of flies. Hell of a place for the capital of our country, huh?"

"I guess it's not too pleasant in the summer. The British Foreign Office lists it as a subtropical climate. Did he have any luck with Secretary New?" Mayor Dwiggins, recently elected and brimming with campaign promises, had journeyed to Washington by train to ask Postmaster General Harry New to give Northmont its own post office.

"Never even saw him. New was out o' town somewhere—prob'ly fishin'—and the mayor had to meet with his assistant. He's hopeful, though. But then Mayor Dwiggins is always hopeful."

We'd reached his drug store, and I could see Mrs. Church workin' behind the counter. "I gotta get back to my patients, Henry."

"Write lots of prescriptions, Dr. Sam!"

During the week of the Fourth my office was mildly busy mostly with the usual summer complaints of farm injuries an poison ivy. When there weren't any patients, April kept me hop pin', insistin' it was the perfect time for an office house-cleanin'.

"I'm not in the mood," I complained on Thursday as she wa emptyin' my wooden file drawers for a thorough dusting. "Can' we do it some other time?"

She moved her stocky body around my desk. "In the winte there's flu and in the spring there's babies. This is the time fo it."

"There's babies all year."

"Seems like more in the spring. Anyway, you been here two an

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a half years, Dr. Sam, an' this is the first good cleanin' we've had! What will the patients think, with you wipin' cobwebs from the files?"

I had to laugh at that. "It's not quite that bad, April."

"You goin' to the band concert an' fireworks tomorrow night?"

"Sure. How about you?" I knew she didn't have a regular beau, and sometimes I felt a little sorry for her. "Want to come with me?"

She didn't wait to be asked twice. "Sure do!"

"Maybe we can grab somethin' to eat at Dixie's first." Dixie's was a lunch counter, the only place in town with decent food. "Pick you up about seven."

Her eyes widened. "In your Runabout?" Ever since the wedding a few weeks earlier she'd been enchanted by my car, a yellow '21 Pierce-Arrow that had been a graduation gift from my parents.

Before I could answer, the outside bell signaled the arrival of a patient. "Are we expectin' anyone, April?"

"Calendar was clear for this afternoon. I'll go see who it is."

She returned in a moment with Tom Younglove in tow. Tom was a local real-estate man who'd been buyin' up some farms in the neighborhood. His ultimate purpose was a source of much gossip and not a little fear. "Dr. Sam," he said, breathin' hard, "I need your help."

"Better catch your breath first. I been tellin' you to lose some of that pouch around your middle."

"It's not me—it's Mayor Dwiggins. He won't see me."

"What can I do about that?"

"He canceled an appointment for today, says he's ill. Is he?"

"I couldn't rightly answer that without examinin' him, now could I? I've been prescribin' a medication for his heart trouble, but I haven't heard of any other complaint. He was just back from Washington the end o' last week. Maybe he picked up somethin' down there. Hear tell they got lots o' bugs in the summertime."

"It's not bugs that's keepin' him from seein' me!" Younglove exploded. "It's my land deals. He knows I need the town board's approval by Monday an' he's just draggin' his feet."

"What are these land deals?" I asked, as curious as the next one.

But Younglove clammed up then, switchin' back to the subject of Mayor Dwiggins's health. "Can't you call him to see if he's really sick?"

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"If he was sick, I'd be hearin' from him. Can't you wait till tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's the holiday."

"But he'll be at the band concert tomorrow night. Nothin' would keep him away from his first Fourth o' July celebration as mayor."

"You're right," Younglove admitted. "I'll see him there."

April stepped in then. "Now you get goin', Tom. The doctor's very busy today. I shouldn't of let you in without an appointment."

Younglove retreated somewhat sheepishly and she went back to cleanin' out the files. But the episode bothered me. "What do you think he's up to, April, buyin' that land? And why is Dwiggins pretendin' to be sick so he won't have to see him?"

"Politicians are all alike," she answered. "They stay clear o' the voters, 'cept at election time."

I got to my feet. "Come on, I'll buy you a soda."

It was something of a ritual, on quiet days, for me to escort April to Doc Church's drug store for a chocolate soda. His place was just down the street, a long narrow store with a checkered tile floor and an embossed tin ceiling. The tobacco was in a glass showcase on the left, with the six-stool soda fountain on the right. Doc Church waved from the back as we entered.

"Remind me," April said. "Before we leave I have to get some witch hazel for mother."

I lowered myself onto one of the fragile-looking stools with their twisted wire legs. "Chocolate sodas as usual?" Doc Church asked us.

I shook my head. "Glass of lemon phosphate today, Henry."

"And a malted milk for me," April decided.

"Tom Younglove was just in my office," I told Doc Church. "Blowin' off steam 'bout the mayor bein' sick and not seein' him."

"Or at least sayin' he's sick," April corrected.

The glass of lemon phosphate slipped from Doc Church's hand and the contents spilled on the counter. "Damn! There goes the week's profits!" He poured another glassful and set it in front of me. "What's Younglove up to with all the land he's buyin'?"

"Wish I knew," I replied. "Maybe we should be buyin', too."

On the way out I reminded April to get the witch hazel for her mother. . .

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Friday evenin' was bright and balmy, with the daylight lastin' till well after eight. Our state was one of the few in the nation to go on daylight-savings time in those days. Most others had rejected it after the unpopular law of 1918 and '19. The farmers around Northmont still complained, but they went along with it.

So it was nearly nine o'clock before the band concert finally got under way, with husky ol' Roy Pinkerton leadin' his brightly uniformed musicians up to the bandstand. "I'm goin' to hate this night," Roy whispered to me as he passed by, and I could understand why. Mayor Dwiggins was scheduled to play an important part in the evening's program, and Roy was the man he'd defeated in the election.

Which I guess proved you could woo more votes with words than with music.

I waved to Doc Church as he went by with his flute, thinkin' how spruce he looked in his brass-buttoned uniform. 'Cept for him and Roy Pinkerton, I didn't know any of the fifteen musicians that well. None of them was a patient, and I knew for a fact that several had been recruited by Pinkerton from Shinn Corners after he failed to find enough local talent.

As the band struck up its opening selection, I glanced around for April. She'd wandered off somewhere in the crowd, and instead of her I spotted Tom Younglove, comin' at me with his usual distraught expression. "I still haven't seen Mayor Dwiggins."

"Cheer up. He'll be here soon."

The band was renderin' a slightly off-key version of *The Stars and Stripes Forever,* and off in the distance I could see the crew settin' up the launchers for the fireworks. Sheriff Lens and a couple of his men were busy keepin' kids away from the scene. Twilight had faded now, and the lights around the edge of town square were comin' on.

"Ever hear the story about that bandstand?" Younglove asked at my side. "How they hanged a man from it?"

"I heard. Is it true?"

"Sure. They say his ghost used to—"

A roar went up from the edge of the crowd, and we turned to see Mayor Dwiggins and his wife Vera threading their way through a sea of well-wishers. Always the politician, Dwiggins was pausing to shake everyone's hand. He wasn't a bad sort, really, despite lookin' like a Boston ward boss. He wanted badly to become a Congressman someday, but it was a long trip from

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Northmont to Washington, even though he'd just taken it last week.

His wife Vera was tall and graceful, just a bit superior to other town ladies. Oddly enough, they didn't resent her for it. When I saw I couldn't get through to His Honor, I settled for reachin' out to touch Vera's arm as she passed. "Hello, Dr. Sam," she said.

"Did you enjoy Washington?"

"Terrible place in the summer! I'm happy to be back home." Tom Younglove tried to speak to her at this point, but she merely said, "The music's lovely, isn't it?" and hurried on her way.

The first half of the concert ended with a crashing of cymbals, and the bandsmen stood up to take a break. Several of them drifted into the crowd for a cold beer, not feelin' obliged to remain on the bunting-draped bandstand during the mayor's speech. But Roy Pinkerton, always the good loser, came forward to introduce his rival.

"Ladies an' gentlemen!" he called through the megaphone. "While the band takes a much-deserved rest an' we get ready for the fireworks, it's my great pleasure to present the mayor of our town—the Honorable David Dwiggins!"

Somewhere behind me a balloon burst and a baby started to cry. But the sounds were quickly drowned out by a loud and sincere round of applause for the man we'd elected. Dwiggins and his wife went quickly up the bandstand steps. He shook hands with Roy Pinkerton while Vera waved to the crowd. Then she went back down the steps as he started to speak.

"It's a pleasure to join you on my first July Fourth as mayor . . ." His voice was strong as he waved aside Pinkerton's megaphone, but his face seemed pale and I wondered if he really was sick. He wasn't the sort to come runnin' to the doctor with every little pain.

Doc Church passed by me with a beer. "He's good for an hour. The kids'll be asleep before the fireworks even start."

He was right, and I decided to do something about it. I pushed my way through to the edge of the crowd where kids were playin' in the darkness, and walked across the open space to the launchin' racks for the fireworks. I knew the person in charge, a farm youth named Chris, and I gave him the word. "Mayor says start the show."

He eyed me uncertainly. "Now? He's still talkin', ain't he?"

"Now."

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He shrugged and struck a match on the seat of his pants. "Okay—here goes!"

I was halfway back to the bandstand when the first skyrocket burst above us. Mayor Dwiggins stopped in midsentence, then recovered long enough to say, "Looks like the big show is starting, folks, so I'll turn the program back to my good friend, Roy Pinkerton. How about a big hand for Roy and the band?"

While the spectators applauded dutifully, the rest of the band was driftin' back to the stand, takin' their seats and pickin' up their instruments. Most eyes were turned skyward at the starbursts of red and blue and white rockets, and the young folks were joinin' in with their own fireworks on the ground.

That was when it happened—so suddenly that for a moment we couldn't believe our eyes.

A figure in a black flowin' cloak pushed past the bandsmen on the steps and rushed at the mayor. The figure wore a hood over his head and a rope noose dangled from his neck. In his right hand was an upraised carvin' knife. Mayor Dwiggins turned towards him, more puzzled than alarmed. Then the knife plunged deep into Dwiggins' chest, and women in the crowd screamed.

The hooded figure whirled around, leavin' the knife buried in his victim's chest. I saw Roy Pinkerton and the others lunge forward to grab the assassin, but in that instant there was a sudden blindin' flash and a puff of thick smoke. For maybe ten seconds we could see nothin'. Then as the smoke cleared I saw Pinkerton and the other musicians standin' over the body.

The killer had vanished.

I rushed forward, pushin' past the musicians who still blocked the steps of the bandstand. There were screams and cries of panic from the crowd now, and general confusion. Above us the fireworks were still burstin' against the night sky.

"What in hell was it?" Pinkerton demanded. "A ghost?"

At his side Doc Church held a danglin' rope noose. "I grabbed the rope round his neck, but he just disappeared!"

I turned over Mayor Dwiggins's body and felt for a pulse, but I knew there wouldn't be one. The knife had gone straight to the heart. "He's vanished!" Pinkerton said in something like awe. "The man who stabbed him has disappeared."

I straightened up and shouted down to Sheriff Lens. "Get this crowd out of here, Sheriff. The celebration's over!"

"What happened?" he asked, fightin' his way to the bandstand.

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"Mayor Dwiggins has been murdered. And his killer vanished right before our eyes—vanished in a puff of smoke!"

"Damnation!" Sheriff Lens exploded an hour later back in his office. "Killers don't disappear in puffs o' smoke! And lynchin' victims don't come back to life after forty years!"

"Of course not," I agreed. "I don't believe this business of a haunted bandstand any more than you do."

"Then what happened to the killer?"

"I'll know better in the mornin', after I've examined the bandstand by daylight."

April was standin' by the window, lookin' out at the street. Though it was nearly eleven, most of the crowd was still about, the adults talkin' in small quiet groups while the kids were still settin' off occasional strings of firecrackers. "I saw a magician in Boston once," she volunteered. "*He* vanished from the stage in a puff o' smoke."

I nodded. "Trap door."

Sheriff Lens snorted. "You think there's a trap door in that bandstand?"

"I'll know in the mornin'. There's not enough light for a thorough examination now."

"What the hell kind of a bandstand would have a trap door in its floor?"

"One that was used for a gallows," I told him.

Doc Church was waitin' for me outside. His brass-buttoned band uniform was scorched and he was still nervous from the night's events. "My God, Dr. Sam, do they know anything yet?"

"Nothin'," I admitted. "Suppose you tell me just what you saw."

"Only this—this man with the hood an' black cloak. Honest, Dr. Sam, I was close enough to touch him!" He brushed at his sooty band uniform.

"Think carefully, Henry. Is there any chance—any possibility at all—that the figure we all saw wasn't real? That it was merely projected by some sort of magic lantern?"

"You kiddin' me, Dr. Sam? He was as real as you or me! Hell, I grabbed at him just as he stabbed the mayor. I was hangin' onto this noose round his neck, an' when he disappeared I still had it. Besides, projected images can't stab people. You know that."

"If the image was projected, someone standin' close to the

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mayor could have wielded the real knife and set off that smoke bomb or whatever it was."

Doc Church looked frightened. "Hell, Dr. Sam, I wasn't *that* close to him. Roy Pinkerton was lots closer than me."

"I remember seeing him there," I agreed. I also remembered seeing the killer push past two bandsmen on the steps. Thinking about it, there could be no doubt he was flesh and blood.

"Couldn't he have dived over the railing during the confusion?"

I shook my head. "The stairs were blocked and there were people all around the sides. The flash and smoke together only blinded us for maybe ten seconds. If he was a real person, he couldn't have gone anywhere—except up or down."

"I could help you investigate it, maybe," he volunteered. "I could take pictures o' the bandstand for you an' Sheriff Lens."

I'd forgotten Doc Church was one of Northmont's few amateur photographers. "I might be able to use you at that," I said.

As I left him and started down the street towards Dixie's Diner, April came runnin' up. "Wait for me," she called out. "Were you goin' to leave me with Sheriff Lens all night?"

"Hardly. Come to think of it, though, that might improve the ol' boy's disposition. No, I wanted to stop at Dixie's to see if anyone was still around there." You could get bootleg whiskey in your coffee cup at Dixie's, and I figured people might be needing it that night.

The first one we saw when we entered Dixie's was Tom Younglove, sittin' at a table up front. "This whole thing is terrible," he said. "I've got land options expirin' Monday morning. His death could ruin me!"

"It sure ruined him."

"I'm sorry if I seem heartless, but it's an important business matter."

"I guess the police will want to know just what that business of yours is all about."

He motioned April and me to join him at the table. "I suppose I have to talk about it sooner or later. I've been buyin' up farm land, as you know. I'm negotiatin' with one of the new automobile companies that wants to build a plant here."

April snorted. "A car factory here in Northmont! It's a wonder somebody didn't kill *you*!"

"Listen, the day is comin' when every American family will own a car. A Pierce-Arrow like yours, Dr. Sam, or a Stutz or Jordan or

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Packard. Plants are springin' up all over the country. It's a chance for Northmont to get its share of the coming prosperity."

"There are a lot of 'em around Detroit."

"Sure, but the Jordan's made in Cleveland. This company, which I can't name, wants two plants—one in New England for the east coast, an' the other near Denver for the west."

"This is why you needed to speak with Mayor Dwiggins?"

"Exactly. I needed the town's approval to put that farmland to industrial use."

"You might be right about the future of the automobile," I said, "but I doubt if Northmont's the place for a car factory."

Roy Pinkerton came through the door at that moment, his spotless band uniform giving him the appearance of a general in some operetta army. He stopped at our table and said, "Hell of a night! The young Brady boy jus' got burned by a firecracker, on top o' everythin' else."

I stood up immediately. "Where is he?"

"Over near the bandstand. They got him pretty well bandaged up, though."

"I'd better have a look anyhow." I was a doctor first and a detective second. My first responsibility was to the boy.

April came along, and we found young Brady propped against a tree in the square. I was surprised to see Vera Dwiggins just finishin' the job of bandagin' his hand. "Glad you're here, Dr. Sam," she said. "Better check over my work."

I examined the whimperin' boy's injured hand as gently as I could. She'd done a good job of first-aid treatment. "If April ever retires I'll take you on as a nurse," I said.

"Thank you."

"I thought you'd be home."

"I couldn't face that empty house. I'm staying the night with friends, but I can't quite face them yet either."

"You'll be all right," I reassured the boy. "Have your mom call me in the mornin'." April took him in tow and I turned back to Vera. "I'm right sorry about your husband. I only knew him as an occasional patient, but I liked him. I know what you must be going through."

"He always had a high regard for you, Dr. Sam."

I pulled at a piece of crepe-paper bunting nailed to the tree. "What was his opinion of Tom Younglove?"

"He didn't take him too seriously."

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"Your husband claimed to be sick yesterday when Younglove tried to see him."

"He *was* sick. His stomach was upset. I wanted him to call you, but he wouldn't let me."

"I see. Well, how about Roy Pinkerton? Was there any bitterness after the election?"

"None that I know of."

I glanced up at the church clock. "We should both be gettin' some sleep. Thank you for helpin' with the boy's injury."

"It was nothing," she replied.

In the morning, just after sunrise, I went back to the park in the town square. It was deserted when I arrived. The crepe-paper bunting still hung from the trees and the bandstand, but there was somethin' forlorn about it now.

I went up to the bandstand and studied the floor where the hooded killer had stood just before he vanished. It was scorched a bit, and there were a few charred bits of black paper about. But no trap door. The planks of the floor were solid. I straightened up and glanced at the cupola above my head. The wooden beams supportin' it showed no evidence of a rope or wire.

And yet—our phantom must have gone somewhere.

"Got the case solved?" a voice behind me asked. It was Sheriff Lens lookin' as if he hadn't been near a bed all night.

"Just checking on this floor, Sheriff. There's no trap door."

"I coulda told you that."

"Then what happened to him?"

"You believe in ghosts?"

"I know—the man who was hanged from the roof forty-odd years ago. I've heard that story."

Sheriff Lens nodded sadly. "I'd sure like some other answer before all them Boston reporters start troopin' in here." He looked around in dismay. "Who in hell ever heard of a haunted bandstand?"

"The thing that bothers me," I said, "is not so much *how* it was done as *why*? Why murder in public with such long odds against escapin' when it could be done easier an' safer in private?"

Before Lens could answer, a black Ford pulled up on the street. Vera Dwiggins was behind the wheel, beckoning to us. I ran over, with the sheriff coming along behind. "Mornin', Mrs. Dwiggins. What's the trouble?"

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"I told you I was staying with friends overnight. I just drove back to my house and discovered someone had broken in while I was away. The pane of glass in the side door is smashed."

"They take anything?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"Nothing seems to be missing, but—well, I'm afraid it might have been the killer and that he was looking for me."

"I'll go have a look-see," Lens said, mainly to calm her. "You comin', Dr. Sam?"

"Yes." I glanced back at the bandstand. "There's nothin' more to be found here."

It was obvious that someone had entered the dead mayor's house by the side door after breakin' the glass and reachin' through to pull the bolt. There were traces of ground-in glass on the floor, where the intruder had stepped in it. I bent to examine them and then went into the kitchen to look around. "You're sure nothin's missin'?" I asked Vera Dwiggins.

"Pretty certain, Dr. Sam."

I walked into the livin' room. It was a nice house, larger than most in Northmont, and this was my first visit to it. Dwiggins had never been sick enough to request a house call.

Sick enough.

"Could I see your bathroom?" I asked suddenly.

She looked surprised. "Of course. It's up here, right at the top of the stairs."

The first thing I saw when I entered it was a tiny sliver of glass on the tile floor near the claw-footed bathtub. "Were you in here this morning?" I asked her.

"No," she replied.

That sliver of glass told me the intruder had gone into the bathroom. And that fact told me who killed Mayor Dwiggins.

A little girl was sitting at the soda fountain of Doc Church's drug store when the sheriff and I entered a half hour later. "Kinda early in the mornin' for ice cream," Sheriff Lens teased her, rustlin' her hair as we walked by.

Doc Church was in the back of the store, standin' on a step ladder while he arranged bottles of liniment on a shelf. "You want to come down a minute, Doc?" I asked. "We gotta talk to you."

He glanced down at me and Sheriff Lens, and I could see in his eyes that he knew. "Lot o' work to do here," he mumbled.

"You better talk to us, Doc," I said.

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"Dr. Sam's got some ideas about the killin'," Sheriff Lens said quietly.

Doc Church came down off his ladder. "You think I did it, don't you?" he asked. His hands were tremblin'.

I nodded. "I know you did it, Henry. More than that, I know *when* you killed him."

"When?" Sheriff Lens repeated, lookin' baffled. "The killin' was last night. Hell, everybody *saw* it!"

"You're wrong, Sheriff," I said, keepin' my eyes on Doc Church. "Mayor Dwiggins *died* last night, but in a very real sense Henry killed him over a week ago, when he gave him the wrong prescription for his heart trouble."

Doc Church collapsed onto a chair and buried his head in his hands. "You *know*! But how could you?"

"The thing that was botherin' me right along, ever since last night's stabbin', was why the killer went to the trouble of imitatin' a ghost and committin' murder before hundreds of witnesses. It had to be dangerous, with so many things that could go wrong, so many chances of bein' captured. But when you realized that Dwiggins was already dyin' from your mistake, you had to kill him in public in such a way that there'd be no question as to the cause of death.

"You see, I knew he'd had his prescription refilled by you last week—you tol' me so—and when we were in your place Thursday, April and I were talkin' about Dwiggins bein' sick and not seein' Tom Younglove. The news upset you so much that you spilled my glass of lemon phosphate—remember? It upset you because you were already afraid you'd made a mistake and my words confirmed it in your mind.

"When someone broke into Dwiggins house last night, but apparently took nothin', it gave me an idea. I went up to the bathroom and found a sliver of glass the intruder had tracked there. The bathroom was your goal, wasn't it—because you had to steal that bottle of pills from the medicine cabinet."

Doc Church lifted his head and I saw that he was sobbing. "It was a terrible mistake I made. He was talkin' about his Washington trip an' I wasn't payin' enough attention to my work. I used the wrong white powder to press into tablet form. When I saw him a few days later he seemed pale an' outa sorts. I came back here to check and found how I coulda made the mistake. I

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still hoped I was wrong in what I feared, but then Thursday you tol' me he was sick an' I knew the worst.

"I knew he was dyin', an' there was no way to save him. He'd been takin' the wrong medication for a week already. Even if I went to him an' admitted the truth, it would be too late to save him. And my life—my family's life—would be ruined forever. Who'd ever trust a prescription to the druggist who had poisoned the mayor?"

"But why the stabbin'?" Sheriff Lens asked.

I answered for him. "Doc Church had to kill him by a method so bizarre that no one would think about doing an autopsy. With several hundred witnesses, who could possibly question the cause of death? I hope someday an autopsy will be required for every violent death, but we haven't reached that yet in this state. Dwiggins's killing was accepted for what it looked like—a stabbin' in public. The poison eatin' away at his insides would go undiscovered."

"How did he disappear from the bandstand?"

"He didn't disappear—he simply became himself by shedding his disguise. Once we know the killer, the method almost explains itself. Doc Church knew the legend of the haunted bandstand—he told me about it himself—and he decided to put it to use. He played the flute in the band, and he knew the musicians would be given a break while Mayor Dwiggins spoke. I saw him in the crowd drinkin' a beer, but I didn't see him return to the bandstand.

"You'll remember the musicians were just resumin' their seating, with the fireworks goin' off and much confusion, when the killer struck. Nobody—not even Pinkerton—could have sworn if Doc Church was on the bandstand or not at that instant. But he was there when the smoke cleared a few moments later, holdin' tight to the noose he said he snatched from the killer's neck.

"What really happened was simple, and I was pretty certain of it when I remembered those charred bits of black paper I found on the bandstand this mornin'. During the break, Doc Church went over behind the trees, out of range of the street lights, and slipped a cloak of black crepe paper over his band uniform. He put a cloth hood, with eyeholes, over his head, an' a noose round his neck to complete the ghost illusion. Then he ran up on the bandstand and stabbed the mayor.

"And the flash o' light? The smoke?" Sheriff Lens asked.

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"He'd covered the crepe paper with flash powder, prob'ly pasted on. He's an amateur photographer, remember, and he'd have some at home. When he set off the powder, it not only blinded us but also burned up the flimsy paper cloak. Doc stuffed the hood under his uniform jacket and held the noose in his hand, explainin' that he'd tried to grab the killer."

"How'd you know?" Doc Church asked, raising his head again.

"The bits of burned crepe paper and your scorched band uniform. The hood protected your face, but the flash of burnin' paper naturally scorched your uniform. We were supposed to think it got burned when you lunged for the killer, but you admitted Pinkerton was *closer than you*—yet his uniform was spotless!"

Sheriff Lens shook his head. "He was takin' an awful chance with a scheme like that. So many things coulda gone wrong!"

"His victim was dyin' already, Sheriff. It was a long chance, but it was his only chance."

"Come on, Doc," Lens said. "I'll have to take you in."

Near the front door the little girl still sat at the soda fountain. "You'll have to go now," Doc Church told her. "I'm closin' up."

"When will you be back?" she asked.

He looked up at the shelves and answered, "Maybe not for a long time."

"So that's how it was, back in 1924, and I guess I'll never forget that Fourth o' July."

The old man paused, his eyes dreamy and far-off.

"Yes, there was one other thing that told me I was right that morning. Remember the broken pane, an' that sliver of glass the intruder tracked into the bathroom? Well, when we walked into the drug store and I saw Doc Church up on his ladder, I could see another bit of glass stickin' to the heel of his shoe.

"Here, let me refill your glass. Now, did I ever tell you about a train ride I once took, and about the impossible robbery that happened on the way?"

"Q"

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